

# The Barnes Foundation

## Journal of the Art Department

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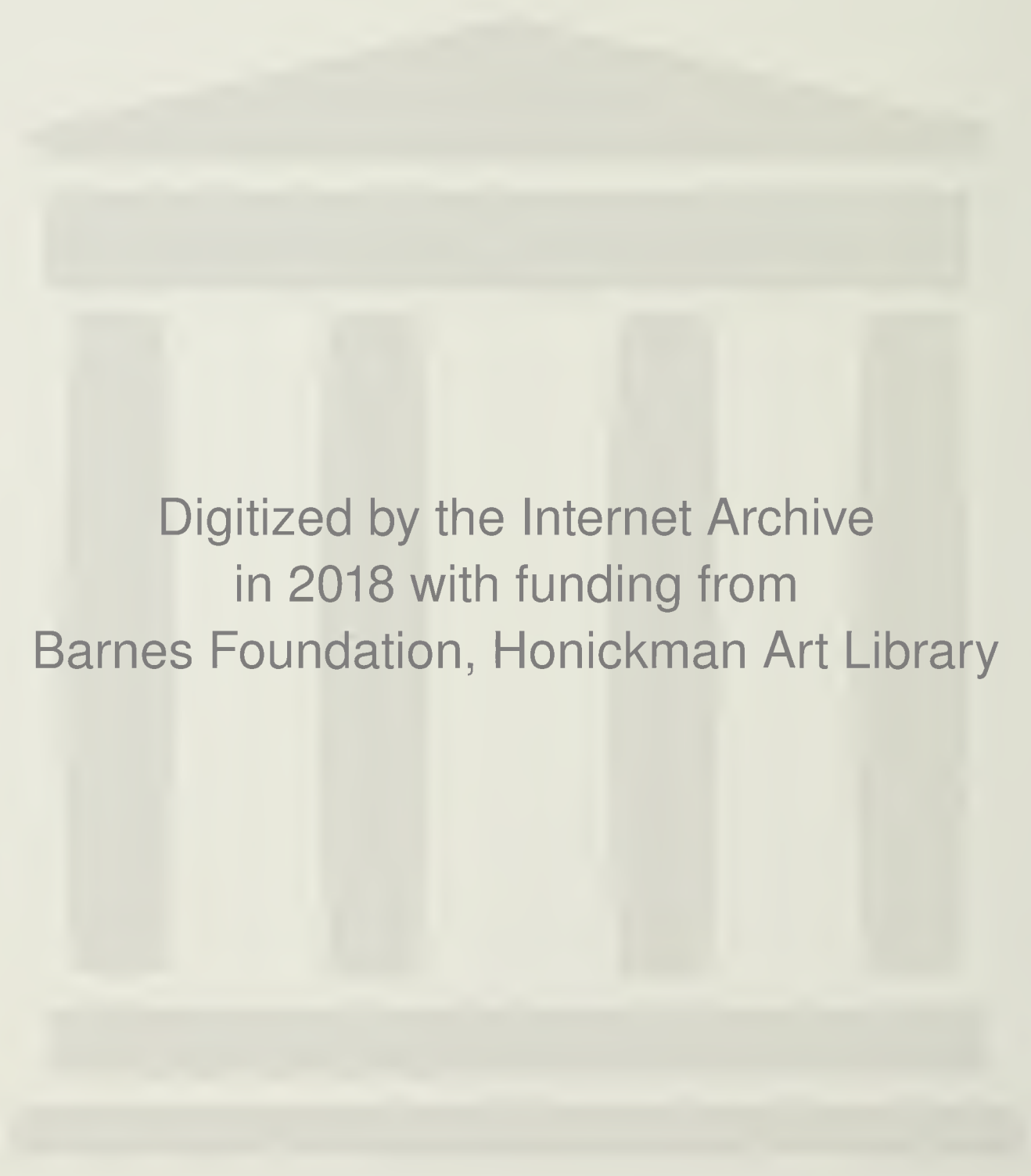
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### **Erratum**

The name of the contemporary English dramatist cited in the footnote of page 16 of this issue of the JOURNAL, in the ninth line of the second paragraph, should be spelled with a "t" instead of, as it now appears, with a "d"—*i.e.*, Pinter.



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# THE BARNES FOUNDATION

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## Journal of the Art Department

*Editor*—VIOLETTE DE MAZIA

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The essays, etc., appearing in the issues of this JOURNAL will, for the most part, be derived from the work of seminar students, alumni, and members of the staff of the Foundation Art Department. On occasion, articles and pieces will be published not directly concerned with the Foundation's philosophy but representing original work by the Art Department's students and outside contributors which the editorial staff considers to be of general interest to the JOURNAL's readers. Publication occurs twice a year.





Reading Room of the Art Department Library



# JOURNAL *of* THE ART DEPARTMENT

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## The Decorative Aspect in Art\*

by VIOLETTE DE MAZIA†

SUCCESSFUL analysis of the aesthetic meaning of a painting depends, as we have indicated in the course of these essays, upon our ability to determine the effect of the relationships established among the picture components and the meaning of the resulting picture situation to us, *i.e.*, the relationships between it and what we are.‡ Thus, in order to perceive the significance of a work of art, as of any thing or situation we encounter, it is necessary to acknowledge both the objective makeup of the encountered entity itself and our own makeup as perceivers of it. Throughout these studies, therefore, we have analyzed the meaning of the artist's statement not only from the standpoint of its constituents, but also from that of the constituents of the activity of perception.

In the present series of essays, beginning with "Expression,"¶ we are approaching an understanding of a work of art by separating, for the purpose of analysis, its expressive, decorative and illustrative aspects from each other. This is an artificial separation—one, as it were, of convenience—

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\* Some of the material of this essay was originally presented in class lectures.

† Director of Education.

‡ For a full discussion of this point, see Violette de Mazia, "Learning to See," *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, Vol. III, No. 1, (Spring, 1972), The Barnes Foundation Press, Merion, Pa., pp. 7-26.

¶ *Ibid.*, Vol. V, No. 2, (Autumn, 1974), pp. 3-32.

for the three aspects do not, in fact, exist in isolation from each other. We construct such a differentiation because to do so affords, like a chemical investigation of the components of a discrete substance, a measure of understanding otherwise unobtainable. It will remain for us later to make amends, to reunite the expressive, decorative and illustrative by examining the nature of the relationships between them.

Just as we may distinguish the aspects or constituents of the object we perceive, so we may distinguish the aspects of the acts of perception. In general, perception of the visual significance of what we discover involves two steps or happenings. First, our eyes must look at, register, the objective constituents of the thing viewed; and we should stress that we mean *look*, for it is not enough to have our ears *listening* to someone else telling us about what *his* eyes have seen: our *eyes* must do the registering, and they must be *our* eyes. And, secondly, we, as more than a pair of eyes—as beings with interests, feelings, a particular background, etc.—must act in terms of our entire personality on the sense report. It is only after both these activities have taken place that we are able to grasp the meanings of what we meet.

With this established, we shall now pick up our topic for the present—the decorative aspect—which we anticipated at the end of our previous essay when we stated that the artist's piece leads us to perceive it because it offers, first of all, what we are naturally, *i.e.*, by nature, thirsty for.

In our discussion of the expressive in art, we concentrated on the second step of the process of perception, that of acting back, in terms of the entire personality, on the information acquired by the senses. With the topic of the decorative aspect in art, we shall begin by focussing on the first step, that of registering with our eyes what is there. In order to do this, we shall have to separate our eyes from us, so as to discover, initially, how the eye tends to behave when allowed to function on its own, and, then—since the behavior of our eye, like that of our other sense organs, in turn affects us—how *we* tend to behave because of our eye's behavior.

When involved in perception as a whole, we look at objects, insofar as we know how, for what they mean. For example, we study a map made by a competent cartog-



rapher in confidence that geographical facts are recorded with reasonable accuracy, unlike what we would expect to find in, say, a painting of a landscape by Cézanne. On the other hand, the map lacks, and we would not look for it there, what Cézanne's mapped-out canvas reveals by its successful expression of his aesthetic experience of the scene, in the course of which he selected, discarded, supplied and reorganized. The cartographer, of course, also selected, discarded, supplied and reorganized, but he did so according to a restricted, hence restricting, code, the rules of cartography—such as the requirement for consistency in scale—which, as rules do, pulled the reins on his imagination and feelings. If we also have learned the code, we can consult the map for the practical information it is intended to give. We consult the work of the artist, on the other hand, for something quite different—for its broad human values that aesthetically enrich the world we know, to see which there is no need of any acquired code, but only an understanding of and an interest in what art accomplishes.

Whether it lights upon a cartographer's map, a Cézanne landscape or any object, our eye initially behaves in the same way. As the camera box it is, with its shutter open, it indiscriminately registers everything on the sensitive "plate" of its retina and, by our sensory system, transmits to us what it has registered. Nevertheless, it spontaneously acknowledges some of these transmissions with greater satisfaction than it does others, quite apart from whether or not *we*, with our preferences and feelings, know or approve of or are interested in what the object has to say. Thus, even if *we* are not concerned with the practical information of the cartographer's map, because of the satisfaction afforded by the very act of registering, our *eye*, normal and at rest and given the chance to function, will be pulled towards and go to it rather than to a blank wall.

In short, the map, by being visually perceptible, pleases the eye. This may be said of the most simple of linear maps appearing in our field of vision: our eye, with no order from us, registers wall and map and then settles on map. And, if another, more sensuously stimulating map appears, for

instance, a bright red one,\* although *we* may not be interested, although *we* may not like such a color, yet our eye, as an antenna to our sensory optic system, enjoys it more than it enjoys absence of color or other, less vivid colors because the red provides it with material upon which to function easily. It feasts upon that red; it is kept busy, entertained, stimulated, active.†

To put it succinctly, then, our eye, with its connection to our sensory system, like our other sense organs, is so constituted that by nature it is fond of being stimulated to action; it naturally craves to be entertained by the outside world, which is for it a continuous floor show. Yet this cannot be said without important qualifications, which become apparent when we examine our eye's behavior more closely and the effect of that on how we ourselves may then tend to behave.

To reach an understanding of this, let us first, more analytically than we did with the maps, follow our eye as it, at rest, and on its own, independent of the control of our emotions, interests, intelligence and imagination, meets and chooses to focus upon a sequence of objects. A large sheet of uniform brown cardboard will serve as the background and stand for our field of vision, and against it we set a disc cut from the same material (Plate 1). The two, of course, match in color, tone and surface; in these respects, our eye receives the same stimulation from each. The disc, however, silhouetted, as it is, against the background, offers our eye the additional opportunity to register what to us says "line," "shape" and, thus, quickly wins the competition for our eye's attention. We then place a trencher‡ beside the cardboard cutout (Plate 2); this second object approxi-

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\* While it is impossible in this essay to demonstrate objectively our points about the effect of color on our eye, it remains true that color is the main ingredient of visual perception and that discussion of it, even in the absence of demonstrative material, is the *sine qua non* of any analysis of visual perception.

† As a matter of fact, it is because of the sensuous satisfaction which some maps offer that they have been used as such things as wall coverings, lampshades, fabrics, scarves, even bathing suits: in these formats, they serve not for their geographical information—at least not of the sort that maps provide—but for their power to catch hold of the eye by feeding and entertaining it, supplying material it can act on with ease.

‡ A trencher is a wooden serving plate, the use of which antedates that of pewter utensils.



mates the first in color, size and shape, but, now, because of the grain of the wood and the stains the trencher has acquired from use, our eye is able to register further what to us says "contrast" and "surface pattern," and it lingers upon this more abundantly stimulating object in preference to the relatively bland disc. Next, a darker trencher joins the established context (Plate 3, at right); from this object, our eye picks up, in addition to the surface pattern, size and shape that it has already picked up, a still stronger contrast, the heightened sharpness of which endows the trencher with a distinction of linear boundary and demarcation of shape that is easy for the eye to register.\* Finally, we bring an octagonal platter of the trencher family into the array (Plate 4, at right), and our eye is readily drawn away from the circular shape of the trenchers to the many-angled outline of the platter. Novelty attracts the eye, relieves it from satiety, allows it to function anew; the multisided platter, as it interrupts the repetitive sequence of circular units, offers such an instance of novelty. Nevertheless, while the attractive force of novelty *per se* soon subsides, the variety of eye "sensations" provided by the octagonal trencher continues to stimulate, hence to hold our eye.

Our eye, indeed, is very human; not only does it, like us, seek out the novel, but, also like us, is drawn to where it gets the most with the least possible effort. A straight line on a plain background does not have much of a chance of attention if a curved line appears nearby, while the curved line tends to lose out when zigzag and curving zigzag lines are added to the setup (Plate 87), and it is the last of these that holds the

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\* The element of rhythm is an important component of perception and, for its rôle as such, will be discussed at length in a later issue of this JOURNAL. We should, however, remark that in itself rhythm, the result of organized repetition, yields pattern and, thus, is eye-attracting: repetition makes for eye-familiarity with the unit repeated, hence provides ease and comfort in the registering of it. Rhythm can, therefore, have a tempering influence on our eye's response to what it meets: here, for instance, as well as in our subsequent combinations of patterning and patterned objects, the units may be registered not as separate items, but as contributory components in a rhythmic sequence; in that event, the eye will take in the objects with equal interest for the sake of the effect of the whole, which is an embodiment of the rhythmic activity of repeated shapes against a background.

eye the "longest."\* Similarly, with three candlesticks, one of a simple, one of a complexly curvilinear and one of a knobbed style (Plate 96), our eye is pulled initially to the middle one, then to the last and then to the first. It is also much because of this proclivity of our eye that cubist paintings (*e.g.*, Plate 30) tend to attract: their eye appeal, their eye fascination, comes in great part from the variety of their linear features. The same may also be said of some "non-objective" and "semi-abstract" paintings, such as Kandinsky's "Composition 8" (Plate 32) and Vieira da Silva's "Domestic Symphony" (Plate 33). The principle can be demonstrated also by setting a flattened-out, many-sided, fancifully cut-out cardboard container next to the platter trencher (Plate 5); assuming, of course, that other factors, such as size, color, etc., be equal, our eye will be irresistibly drawn by the relative complexity of the cardboard container.

Variety of linear features catches and holds our eye, however, only up to a point, beyond which saturation is reached. When our eye is satiated, when it cannot take in any more, it tires, folds up, stops registering and reporting, just as our ear stops functioning beyond a certain intensity of sound or as our body, overworked, refuses to lift a limb. Such is the case when the water from a spigot be so hot or so cold that, when we test it with our finger, we cannot tell which it is. In the same fashion may our ability to taste—for instance, with regard to such highly spiced food as *chili con carne*—go dead. Soon after I came to this country, I was taken to a restaurant in New Mexico and treated to a spicy, Spanish-type meal, the flavor of which I was soon unable to distinguish. The remedy was simple; I was told to take a piece of butter in my mouth. And, indeed, the butter provided relief from the overstimulation of my palate, and I could taste the food again. In Europe, particularly in Germany, ice cream is frequently served with a glass of water at room temperature, the water answering the same purpose as did the butter.

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\* "Longest" is only a manner of speaking, for, in fact, our eye registers all at once, but registers more, because there is more to register, with the curving zigzag line during the same time spent.



The principle of "remedy" or relief is equally applicable to paintings. In Vieira da Silva's "Domestic Symphony" (Plate 33), there is a large amount of linear activity, but also intervening "pats of butter"—the color patches. In Mark Tobey's "Dormition of the Virgin" (Plate 85), while the thick white line functions somewhat as a "pat of butter" in the sense that it serves as an anchor for the eye in the context of the intricate, meandering, weblike pattern of the overall linear composition, it also partakes of that pattern to the extent that it becomes the main element in the picture activity. In Klee's "Little World" (Plate 89), on the other hand, there is a mass of linear units, but no "butter," and our eye, as a result, gets entangled and tires, as it does, too, in Gustav Klimt's "The Virgin" (Plate 88), wherein relief from the insistent activity of the pattern is inadequate and not compositionally integrated. In contrast to the Klimt, then, Tobey's usage, although not strictly that of a "pat of butter," offers more than sufficient relief from the complexity of the whole both to serve the purpose that the "pat of butter," in general, does and to lend its own intrinsic interest to the composition. In Klee's "Destruction and Hope" (Plate 84), there are "pats of butter"—the landing places provided by the few color areas—as there are, too, in Jackson Pollock's "Summertime" (Plate 34 and Detail Plate 35), although in the Pollock the rhythmic recurrence of the landing places fails to culminate in, to anchor the ongoing linear elements on, an overall organizational focus.\*

By the same token, we and our senses are unable to respond to the other extreme. Our ear is deaf to sounds that are too low, our taste buds are frustrated by food we call

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\* We may, incidentally, note that the principle of the "pat of butter" relief was frequently used by the Japanese woodcut artists. In their work, it takes the form of a play between "plain and print," *i.e.*, between compartmental areas of smooth, unvaried and unpatterned color and color compartments broken up by a variety of patterning motifs. From the point of view of our eye's exploration and response, compare, for instance, the effect of Yoshitsuya's woodcut shown on Plate 78, wherein the principle is applied, with that of the woodcut by Toyokuni on Plate 77, wherein the unrelieved ongoing sequence of sumptuous patterning involves every section of the composition in what is practically a single, all-inclusive, elaborately pattern-activated plane.

flat. Mineral oil is so difficult for many of us to swallow, more, I believe, because of its tastelessness than because of its oiliness; Evian water, a popular French mineral water which some Americans find hard to take, was described to me by one of its critics as being as flat as if someone had stepped on it. Along the same line of thought, are we not frustrated and annoyed when, perhaps due to a head cold, our olfactory organ, our sense of smell, fails us? Our eye, likewise, is annoyed, made unhappy, by boundaries that are too ill-defined, by units that are amorphous, for it cannot focus on them, get hold of them, bite into their identity; what is fuzzy or woozy is not agreeable to it. When we feel dizzy from a shot of Novocain, from unfocussed opera glasses, from ear trouble, our eye is dissatisfied; it must strain. So it is with pictures such as Carrière's "Mother and Child" (Plate 37), in contrast to the area of background at the left in Renoir's "Nude, Back View" (Plate 98), where a "pat of butter"—a small unit of concentrated light close to the left boundary of the tree trunk—helps our eye to focus and gives it the clue it needs to catch other, more subdued units of light that occur in the seemingly uneventful landscape. Furthermore, this concentrated light, with its subsidiary echoes, plays a part in the entire composition, for, together with other units of light, some more subdued, others more assertive and precise, it is caught and integrated in the ebb and flow of a pattern of lighted units that encompasses both foreground and background. Without it, because of the strong pull on our eye of the foreground units by way of their color and their accents of light, our eye would be likely to ignore that area of the setting and only take account of the foreground units.

Indeed, light is the first thing that stimulates our eye and offers it a chance to function and, moreover, to function easily. With a shiny pewter plate and a trencher beside it (Plate 6), our eye, for its own satisfaction, seeks out the pewter. Because of the attraction that light has for our eye, it is sometimes used in painting as a primary compositional device. In El Greco's "Vision of St. Hyacinth" (Plate 76), for example, our eye is caught by the brightly



illuminated robe of the monk, moves to the lighted area of the Madonna, then to the faintly illuminated figure in the niche at the upper right and, finally, to the gentle glow of the floor. Similarly, in Rembrandt's "Danaë" (Plate 50), the focus of light on the nude first draws our eye, and the subsidiary units of light all around the composition carry it over the entire canvas. In Daumier's "The Imaginary Invalid" (Plate 36), the track followed by the units of light (doctor's face, jabot, hands, reclining figure and highlights on the still life) helps to unify the two main compositional constituents. Chardin, in his "Still Life with Cabbage" (Plate 74), relies strongly on the path taken by subtle highlights to lead us into and around the picture area. Claude le Lorrain, in "Harbor Scene, Venice" (Plate 53), uses the focus of light to pull our eye to the distance, and we see the foreground only on, so to speak, the rebound, as we do also the foreground in "Country Scene" (Plate 54) by Susan Cray.\* In Toulouse-Lautrec's "The Laundress" (Plate 65), our eye is led by way of areas of light from foreground to background,† while in Rembrandt's "Self-Portrait" (Plate 73), the light keeps us in the foreground, and our eye glides back into space as the light is gradually swallowed up by the surrounding darks.

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\* The handling of light to give a "message on the rebound" is often exploited in photography for its possibilities as a dramatic, eye-catching device (*e.g.*, Plate 67).

† Light as an organizing feature also occurs in photography, as is illustrated in Plate 66, wherein our eye is made to travel from foreground to background in much the same manner as it does in the above-mentioned "The Laundress" of Lautrec. Indeed, most of the aesthetic qualities distinctive of painting are possible in photography when photography is art. In fact, although we are, in this essay, confining our observations to painting and a few other specific areas of experience, it should be understood that the general consequences and implications of the principles and concepts that pertain to the sensuous appeal as an aspect of painting apply equally well to its rôle in the other arts—sculpture, music, the dance and so forth, as well as photography—these consequences and implications depending for their effects in each instance on the nature of the medium, its own vocabulary and its intrinsic necessities, limitations and potentialities.

So, light attracts and holds our eye,\* but, again, only up to a point, beyond which saturation and blindness intervene; our eye blinks and turns away, as when it is unwilling or unable to tolerate the glare of the sun on snow, strong, unshielded electric illumination or the garish brightness of color due to unintegrated, overemphatic or superficial light in paintings such as Kisling's "Torso" (Plate 72), Benton's "Invasion" (Plate 38) and Orozco's "Zapatistas" (Plate 39). At the same time, our eye is equally distressed by episodes of too little light—a dark afternoon, a foggy day, the blackouts during the war. *We* do not like them because *we* know what we miss or recognize an implied danger; our *eye* does not like them because it is denied the chance to function readily; too much effort spoils its fun, frustrates it. Thus it is that the murky, obscure areas frequently found in the *sfumato* of Leonardo da Vinci (*e.g.*, Plate 71) and the unrelieved black in Hals (*e.g.*, Plate 82) force our eye to squint and shift its focus in its efforts to discern what might be there. Yet darkness tempered by effects which give our eye matter to catch onto pleases our eye, satisfies its requirements. In Renoir's "Pomegranates" (Plate 45), although there are dark areas, there are modulations within them that provide substance, definition, for our eye to register. In El Greco's "Vision of St. Hyacinth" (Plate 76), the black feeds our eye with its deep lustre. In Manet's "Men Tarring Boat" (Plate 46), the black gives our eye the opportunity to function on a pattern of brush work and of tones. Again, however, both a too abrupt patterning contrast—as the flashes of light in Orozco's "Zapatistas" (Plate 39)—and a too ill-defined modulation of dark and light—as the "soft focus" effect of the demarcations in Renoir's "The Bohemian Girl" (Plate 83) or the diffuse boundaries in Carrière's "Mother and Child" (Plate 37)—leave the eye confused and dissatisfied.

Our eye, again like us, is also enticed by diversity. The engraved, polished pewter plate, shown on Plate 7, at right, offers our eye all that may be found in the plain pewter plate,

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\* Why, after all, does a girl powder her nose? Let us divulge her secret: she does not want the highlight on her nose to attract attention and, thus, to detract from the sparkle in her eyes.



on Plate 7, at left, as well as an extra act in the show—the engraved linear pattern, which, in turn, gives rise to an intricate series of patterning effects, hence a variety of features capable of luring our eye.\* By the same token, an aluminum movie reel (Plate 8, at right), with its bolder pattern, its simpler-to-take-in shapes, will steal our eye's attention from the more subtle attractions of the engraved pewter plate. From this general point of view, we can also compare the fold in the Saint's sleeve in El Greco's "Vision of St. Hyacinth" (Plate 76, Detail Plate 64) with a similar triangular fold in the cloth in Cézanne's "Skull and Fruit" (Plate 47, Detail Plate 63): the unit in the El Greco is the first to draw the eye, principally by way of its intensity of light, due in part to the deep black surrounding it, but the Cézanne unit, with its content of tonal modulations and pattern of color and strokes, once registered, will hold our eye's attention. Likewise, a Wedgwood saucer of the black-and-white "Cashmere" set (Plate 9, at right) will, because of its sharp contrast of dark shapes against light, attract our eye more readily than will the generally monochromatic, merely linearly patterned pewter plate, while a blue-and-white Staffordshire saucer (Plate 10, at right), because its darks are blue, will both capture and keep our eye's attention over and above the Wedgwood, which offers only black against white: color sends positive rays to our eye, as opposed to the negative ones of black, which occurs when all hues in the spectrum are absorbed or when there is a total absence of light. Accordingly, the Staffordshire saucer offers not only the stimulus of patterning contrast found in the Wedgwood saucer, but also that of color.†

Still, color which serves mainly as an element of contrast

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\* Pattern—*i.e.*, an organized set of repeated units, a rhythmic sequence—gives familiarity, comfort to our eye, provided the rhythm of recurrence is not prolonged beyond the point where repetition tires rather than stimulates it.

† Hypothetically, if the pattern were identical in both the Wedgwood and the Staffordshire saucers, and if the intensity of the Wedgwood black were equal to that of the deep Staffordshire blue, it is problematic whether our eye would not find itself in a quandary, soon to be resolved, however; for, while the immediate call to the eye will come from the contrast of tone extremes that occur in the Wedgwood saucer, the vibrant color in the Staffordshire will command a more lingering attendance.

lacks the power to hold the eye against color which provides a variety of sensations: between a worn Staffordshire plate (Plate 11, at right) and an unused one (Plate 11, at left)—as between the Cézanne and the El Greco units of folded cloth—our eye is less directly attracted by the former, lacking, as it does, the positive and obvious contrasts of the latter; once caught by the former, however, our eye will tend to linger on it, for the modulations of color attending its worn condition present a wealth of material for the eye to register. In a juxtaposition of the two-color (blue and white) Staffordshire saucer and a small plate of a multicolored Dutch set (Plate 12), our eye will find richer fare in the plate; and, again, duplicating our earlier comparison of the two Staffordshire examples, if this Dutch plate (Plate 13, at left) is put beside a similar Dutch piece, now, however, exhibiting markings of age (Plate 13, at right), it is to the first that our eye will go, but on the mottlings of the worn one that our eye will dwell.

Nevertheless, color itself, particularly when it is intensely bright, is compellingly “interesting” to our eye. A simple, ordinary coaster of a vivid, saturated red (Plate 14, at center) will attract our eye, as a magnet does steel filings, more easily than the Wedgwood and Staffordshire saucers, and if another object, such as a canister lid (Plate 15, at right), gives us the same red, but in larger quantity than that provided by the coaster, our eye will go there instead because it finds more to function on with less expenditure of effort.\* Of course, the element of novelty mentioned earlier comes into play as well, since the canister lid is the newest to appear in our eye’s field of vision. Still, the coaster may, on account of its smallness, function as a color focus does in a painting and steal the show: it is, as it were, unexpected,

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\* An interesting fact is demonstrated by the following experiment. If we move pieces of colored metal to the side of our line of vision, we shall find that our eye picks up red far beyond the range where it can pick up blue, green or yellow. This does not mean that when all these colors are viewed directly our eye picks up any one more readily than another; what it does mean is that our eye has more opportunities to pick up red, since red alone is registered in the outer limits of our peripheral vision.



an element of surprise.\* Thus does the little heart on the envelope of a St. Valentine message (Plate 40) and the red roof of the small foreground cottage in van Gogh's "Thatches in the Sunshine (Reminiscence of the North)" (Fold-out Plate 92). Renoir, in his "Pomegranates" (Plate 45), gives a more subtle version of the focalizing notes; here, our eye flows from unit to unit in search, so to speak, of a resting place, a place to feed, to focus on, and finds it time after time in color- and light-accented units throughout its journey.

To establish our point more firmly, we should clarify the distinction between what we earlier described as and termed a "pat of butter" sense-*relief* unit and what we now compare it with and refer to as a "coaster" or sense-*focalizing* unit. The two do, of course, fulfill part of each other's function: the "pat of butter" unit must attract our eye's attention, divert it from other visual material, in order to achieve its purpose of relieving, and it therein acts as a benchmark, a focus, in our eye's domain; by the same token, the unit which asserts itself more directly as an organizational focal element, that is, as a "coaster," also draws our eye away from what it registers elsewhere, thus serving simultaneously as an element of relief. In each case, the eye-attracting power is the result of the unit's marked difference from its context: relief is achieved by contrast; focus is achieved by contrast. From this, it may perhaps be said that a "pat of butter" and a "coaster," if not an actual pair of twins, are surely siblings—indeed, siblings sympathetic to and closely resembling each other and not always easy to separate or tell apart. And, in fact, it is not so much on the basis of their identity *per se* that we do distinguish them, but on the basis of their relationship to the context in which we find them, specifically, on the basis of the degree of contrasting emphasis of the unit's makeup against its surroundings and on the basis of the nature of the primary rôle it is consequently called upon to play—whether it provides a more or less forceful impetus for the compositional organization or a more generalized,

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\* The concept of "element of surprise," specifically with regard to its place in contributing aliveness to life and, correspondingly, to expression in art, will be discussed and developed in one of our essays to be published later in the JOURNAL.

less dominating, counterbalance for, relief from, other compositional activities. In applying this principle to given works of art, it should, of course, be remembered that the particular extent of a unit's identity as one or the other, "coaster" or "pat of butter," can range from a clear case of an extreme to an indeterminate state of ambiguity.\*

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\* With the above distinction made, let us look more closely at instances of "pat of butter" and "coaster" in painting. In the Yoshitsuya woodcut, on Plate 78, the unpatterned areas are used not to provide a focal point for the surrounding compositional material with which they contrast, but to offer a foil to it, a resting place for our eye in the midst of patterning activity. In other words, the "plain" areas attract more because of their novelty in the picture situation than because of their own positive nature. Accordingly, our eye readily alternates between the "plain" and the "print" areas, remaining with the former only for as long as its difference from the latter affords relief. Likewise with Klee's "Destruction and Hope" (Plate 84) and Vieira da Silva's "Domestic Symphony" (Plate 33), the color patches, while serving as anchors or points of focus in the composition, are primarily attractive for the break they give from the linear activity of the rest; and, rather than holding our eye, they send it back to that activity refreshed and ready for more. Furthermore, although they offer an element of contrast in that they counter the pervasive compositional activity, in all other respects they are so handled as to partake of the basic qualities expressed by the whole: the delicacy imparted to the color patches in the Klee re-affirms the delicacy of the linear motif, while the crispness and clarity of the color areas in the da Silva are one with the incisiveness of the pattern of lines.

Among other kinds of situations we might be faced with in which the "pat of butter" element is all-important to the response of our senses, hence possibly also to the ease with which *we* take them in or respond to them and to the significance *we* derive from them, we might cite the concert or theater performance with its intermissions, the banquet with a sherbet served—supposedly to retard by its coldness the diner's digestion—between the substantial roast and the elaborately garnished, opulently stuffed fowl, the Beethoven symphony with its scherzo that separates the ponderous chordal pulsations of the preceding and subsequent movements, the Pinder play with its eloquently effective silences, the Shakespeare tragedy with its intervening elements of comedy, the wings of an architectural construction and the frequently employed device of the simple, short, recessed passage to set them off from each other as it connects them and relieves the otherwise single-block massiveness of the whole. On the other hand, an uninterrupted, solid three-hour lecture—be it on the most interesting of topics, delivered in the most interesting of fashions to the most interested of audiences—cannot help but suffer in the clarity of its reception, as happens with the Toyokuni shown on Plate 77, the Klimt on Plate 88 and the Klee on Plate 89, precisely because of the surfeit of activity and the absence of that period of rest or respite, the breathing spell, the relieving intermission, in short, the "pat of butter." Obviously, the more substance there is to the matter presented, the greater the need for the "pat of butter" relief: Marcel Proust is, indeed, not easy to read.

A "coaster," in contrast to a "pat of butter," acquires its significance by its inherent positiveness within the picture situation. In "The Trench" (Plate 44) and "The Drinker" (Plate 94) by Cézanne, the red semaphore in the one and the color shape of fruit in the other act primarily as focal units in that they spe-



Once more to illustrate the effect of color on our eye: between a plain, monochromatic green plate and a plate in "spatterware" of the same green tone (Plate 16) there is a fairly even competition for our eye's regard, the first presenting its color saturation, the second its mottled pattern of light and dark. With the green "spatterware" saucer with red and yellow dots (Plate 17, at right), our eye is caught by an additional element of novelty, of drama, and is fed, kept

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cifically attract the eye by virtue of the drama of their presentation—the surprise of the color of the first, the small size and spotlighted character of the latter. At the same time, however, neither unit is given such emphasis that it commands attention at the expense of the rest of the canvas; instead, each plays a number of supportive rôles: the semaphore, for instance, among other things, serves to consolidate the upper and lower parts of the composition, to draw unto itself and to unite the various planes of the hills and, together with the house at the left and the tree clump at the right, to level off the drama of the up-and-down boundaries of the hills and, thus, to facilitate our eye's moving across the area of the canvas; while the piece of fruit on the table in "The Drinker," by drawing our eye, helps it to discover and to register the lower half of the painting. In Mondrian's picture which he called "Broadway Boogie-Woogie" (Plate 95), but which might more fittingly be titled "The Merrymaking of the Square Coasters," the "coasters" consist in a multiplicity of units of varied color, size and shape that are disposed over a gridlike plan in a continuous play which entertains our eye and carries it over the entire surface of the composition with a gently flickering, staccato rhythm. Less obvious than in Mondrian, but equally effective as eye entertainment, is the play of "coasters" in many Byzantine mosaics (*e.g.*, Plate 80)—an effect that results, in part, from the nature of the medium itself. The small red heart in Klee's "Winter Sleep" (Plate 41) provides an instance of a "coaster" which functions somewhat like a "pat of butter": positive and direct in its pull on our eye, it nevertheless stays second in command, conceding its "eye interest," which is rapidly exhausted, to that of the more richly rewarding varied linear flow and delicate color of the rest. Contrary to this is the small red heart of the Valentine (Plate 40), which, by its location, shape and the simple and crisp color contrast it provides, plays the main rôle in establishing the identity, the character of the whole; indeed, it steps beyond the usual function of a "coaster" and asserts itself as the star performer, relegating the effect of the envelope's lines to that of a completely subordinate cast.

In the above examples, the "coasters," although focal points by way of contrast, remain organically integrated with their context. That is, for all their powers of attraction, they serve the purposes of the picture as a whole. When, however, as with the red roof of the foreground cottage in van Gogh's "Thatches in the Sunshine" (Fold-out Plate 92), the unit of contrast lacks significant affinity with the rest, when, that is, the effect of the contrast detracts from meanings established elsewhere, it ceases to provide a focus around which adjoining areas organize, but becomes, instead, a "hole," a break in the composition. Our eye is attracted, but attracted because the unit stands out as matter-out-of-place, an "intruder" in the scene: the intensity of the color, its lack of modulation and the size of its expanse are nowhere predicted, nor are they required. And, thus attracted, our eye is likely to be arrested, transfixed, in its survey and to become blind or indifferent to the less immediately eye-compelling but possibly richer offerings to be found in the surrounding areas of the painting.

busy, occupied thereafter by the variety of wavelengths the various colors supply. This relationship between the "interest" of an object to the eye and the object's relative abundance of color wavelengths can be seen in paintings by comparing, for example, the solidly-single color of the dress in Corot's "Madame Lemaitre" (Plate 61) with the variegated color, not unlike that in the Corot in overall hue, of the garments of the central figure in Seurat's "The Ladies' Man" (Plate 62), the latter of which rewards our eye's acknowledgement with a veritable feast of sensations.

Further demonstration of the fact that the eye will gravitate to and dwell on the multicolorful can be made with another series of plates. The "cabbage rose" luncheon plate (Plate 19, fourth from left), boldly patterned in rose and green with subsidiary areas of yellow, and the highly intricate Dutch (Plate 19, third from left) and "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation' " (Plate 19, at right) luncheon plates\* overwhelm the Staffordshire saucer and banish the trencher into oblivion insofar as our eye is concerned. Nor does the colorful display exhaust our eye, for each of the plates contains and disposes the multitudinous color sensations it serves in an organized pattern, allowing, as it were, for peaceful interludes between the rich courses of the banquet.†

The attractive potency of abundance of color is also qualified by other factors, such as the size of the color units and, as already noted, the novelty of presentation.‡ Thus, for ex-

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\* The color scheme of the Dutch plate is dominated by wine-red and purple-blue in the main motifs and green in the foliage, and that of the "Gaudy Dutch" is made up of reddish brown and deep blue in the large units and green and yellow in the small areas of foliage.

† After the banquet feast, however, our eye may well turn from its surfeit of sensations to the simple, restfully quiet trencher—the principle, again, of the helpful "pat of butter," perhaps demonstrated on Plate 25—as, correspondingly, our palate, after savoring a multitudinous variety of taste chords, may also rediscover the modestly unassuming, yet positive, taste-charm of the cupcake. Or, after the rich visual color fare of a Renoir painting (*e.g.*, Plate 98) or the sensuously stimulating multipatterned units in a Japanese woodcut (*e.g.*, Plate 78), our eye may seek out and go to the relatively tranquil color of a Claude (*e.g.*, Plate 53) or to the unpatterned, uniformly colored areas in other parts of the woodcut print. Indeed, does not our eye at times crave the sight of a blank wall?

‡ We have, of course, simplified our examples for the sake of ease of discussion and should bear in mind the fact that other considerations—size of the container, relative location, character of organization, etc.—may also play an important part in our eye's reaction to the visual world.



ample, our eye would hesitate in making a choice from among the Dutch plate (Plate 18, at left), with its profusion of patterns, the "cabbage rose" plate (Plate 18, center), with its large-scale color drama, and the "Gaudy Dutch 'carnation' " plate (Plate 18, at right), with its complex colorfulness. However, the cup plate\* of the "cabbage rose" family (Plate 20, second from left) or, for that matter, the coaster (Plate 21, second from left), may detract our eye from its larger counterpart—its smallness and the resulting concentration of its patterning shapes and colors lending a heightened intensity to the stimulation it gives our eye. At the same time, the dinner plate of the "cabbage rose" set (Plate 20, third from left) offers, by its large size and large color units, a still greater amount of eye-entertaining material and, through this, may retain our eye's attention the "longest." Likewise, the "Gaudy Dutch 'carnation' " plate (Plate 24, at right) may pull our eye by the novelty of its dark blue internal accents and rim band, while the "Gaudy Dutch" in the "dove" pattern (Plate 24, at left) will pull by an unexpected element of variety—the large area of orange-salmon-pink at the bottom. Finally, as already observed, it is a fact that, as soon as an object offers visual features not provided by objects precedingly viewed, our eye becomes sated with what it has had and turns to the new material, whether richer or not from our eye's point of view.

There is, of course, hardly need to remark that, as we noted of line and of light, a plethora of color will tire or confuse rather than gratify our organ of sight. The Mummers' Parade needs the "pats of butter" afforded by the less flamboyantly costumed comics, the groupings and the visual "silences" effected by their spacing, for our eye to be guided and for it to enjoy and not be sated by the abundant colorfulness of the whole pageant. Correspondingly, the colorful paintings of Soutine (*e.g.*, Plate 75) need the pauses,

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\* In the nineteenth century, the period when soft-paste ware was made, a cup plate was traditionally placed next to the cup and saucer. The cup had no handle, and the saucer was relatively deep. The user was expected to pour the coffee from the cup into the saucer, from which he proceeded to drink it, and to park the empty cup on the cup plate (Plates 22 and 23).

the accents, the resting places furnished by contrasts and plays of shapes and of light and dark for their richness of color to be set off and to be rewarding to our eye. Against this, many an emulator of Soutine, particularly among the "Abstract Expressionists," as, for example, de Kooning (*e.g.*, Plate 103), offer, with their extravagant, frenzied dramatics of paint handling—little more than calisthenic performances of the brush—but an eye-bewildering color medley.

In all the above cases, our eye is drawn by the stimulating features of the objects discussed regardless of whether or not *we* like them, whether or not *we* find them of interest; for, whatever *our* preferences might be, our *eye's* preferences will inevitably lie with whatever provides *it* with the greatest variety of effects of the kind *it* finds stimulating and entertaining. *We* might, for instance, be interested in and therefore attracted to the simple, hand-carved trencher rather than to any of the sense-titillating, eye-appealing plates that succeeded it. Nevertheless, our *eye*, free from the effect upon it of *our* interest, will show selfish, self-serving "interest" in the latter and, for its own satisfaction, be drawn readily to the more vivid or the more pattern-activated of the displayed objects.\*

To illustrate in another way the point of our eye's preferences as against ours, let us look at a wall of paintings (Plate 42) on which one, Matisse's "Standing Figure" (at upper left), is out of place in terms of the abruptness of its contrasts, the high-key tonality of its color, the untempered clarity of its linear patterns, etc., as against the same wall (Plate 43) on which a painting with characteristics in keeping with those of the rest has replaced the Matisse. In the first instance, although *we* may prefer or be more interested in the works of the old masters that hang on the wall, our *eye* will, of its own volition, center upon the Matisse and draw us after it, directing us to see the Matisse practically to the exclusion

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\* This action of our eye is, of course, subject to modification by other conditions. For example, since, as we have mentioned, our eye also goes to the new, were the order of presentation reversed and a cardboard disc or a trencher shown last, our eye would be drawn away, though but briefly, from the more colorful objects, to which, soon afterwards, it would return.



of all the other paintings within our field of vision. That is to say, thanks to the spontaneous impulse of our eye, the Matisse steals the show, much like the red coaster tends to do when placed in the context of possibly more interesting, but less vividly sense-stimulating, antique trenchers and plates (Plate 21).

In other words, our eye, unmindful of our interests, knowledge and feelings, seeks its own sensuous gratification. It may, indeed, under its own initiative, go more willingly to pictures which, from the aesthetic point of view, correspond to the machine-made coaster—such as Léger's "Three Women" (Plate 31) as against Renoir's "Bathing Group" (Plate 29)—rather than to those capable of providing greater intellectual satisfaction. For our eye goes after, gathers, reports wavelengths of light, not meanings; it acts on its own as a scouting agent for visual stimulations, as a sensation-collector; it functions for the sake of functioning, for the sake of exercising its powers, its faculty, and it seems to revel in doing so. And we, endowed with senses, are so constituted that satisfaction is inherent in our use of them; that is, whether or not we ultimately like what we see or hear or feel or smell or taste, we enjoy seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting freely, abundantly and variedly. We have a sore tooth or a bruise, and we cannot resist touching it; there is an immediately felt satisfaction, a voluptuousness, as the sense activity takes place. Consequently, as we noted earlier, indistinct color, dim light, ill-defined shapes, as a voice too low or too shrill, a pattern of syllables mumbled together, frustrate our sensory equipment; our eye, our ear balk at the effort required, indeed will not make the effort unless prodded by *our* interest, *our* sense of duty or *our* curiosity. But, so far as our *senses* are concerned, and we as strictly sensuous beings, no bait, no bite.

Such baiting that makes our senses eager to bite is constantly at work in life and, therefore, in art. In the daily course of living, we find, for instance, that we need a belt, a hat, a tie. (What is a necktie for, anyway? Is there not a button at the neck of a shirt to hold the collar in place, and is not his tie the first thing a man takes off when he seeks to be comfortable?) Let us suppose we need a belt to hold our

garment in place. Our eye, our roving scout, starts to function in the way it does and spots a bright red belt—and our heart follows. *We* know it is a flimsy belt, and the honest salesgirl tells us that the color will fade—yet we are likely to buy that belt. Asked why, we answer that we like it, it makes us happy—reason enough!

What is it about the belt that makes us happy? A “*je ne sais quoi*,” a “something about it”; it has “it”—“it” obviously standing for its immediate appeal to the senses. Our senses are gratified, and our common sense, not too common at that, goes under the effect of that aspect of the belt, as well as of other things, which, for no other reason than that it pleases our senses, makes us act one way in preference to another, possibly more intelligent, way. And it is that “something,” that aspect of the world which, independently of meanings *we* may perceive, offers an immediate reward to our senses, that aspect which we enjoy for what our senses get that constitutes the sensuous or the decorative aspect.\*

What we call the decorative, then, derives from sense stimulation and is independent of meanings. The traffic light, for example, may change from amber to red as we approach the corner; and, although *we* fume with anger at being delayed, our *eye* may enjoy the contrast between the amber and the red. The sight of a girl who is, as we say, easy on the eye may please, yet *we* know she is “dumb,” just as the belt that warmed the cockles of our heart, or rather, activated our optic nerve, is likewise “dumb.” Other examples: the grain of wood, the feel of velvet, the squeak of snow or of dry leaves, the crackling and smell of burning wood. Again, *we* may not like or be interested in what they mean, but our *senses* do not know or care; they have fun. A starry sky pleases regardless of whether or not it serves an interest in astronomy or embellishes a romantic interlude; it is there

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\* That in our example our eye is attracted to what is flimsy should not be taken to mean that *its* “interests” are invariably at odds with *ours*; rather, they are independent, and, indeed, the red belt would have captured our eye had it been sturdy and its color fast. At the same time, however, our eye’s “interests” do carry weight, for *we* are drawn to what *it* likes even when *we* recognize that the object of its esteem is hopelessly flawed from *our* point of view.



as a delight for our eye, as something for our eye to enjoy. Food that “tickles” our palate attracts us before possibly more wholesome fare; we shall reach for the appetizingly presented, scrumptious-looking chocolate sundae rather than for the unattractive bowl of porridge. There is sensuous pleasure, too, in hearing a foreign language, not a word of which makes sense; but our ear enjoys the pattern of the novel ups and downs of the sounds and their modulations. My father, when I was a child, used to send me into ecstasy with the rippling, sonorous, rolling trill of the Spanish “r” in the sentence “*¡Que rápidos corren los carros del ferro-carril!*” (which is to be pronounced with the stress on the first syllable of each word, except for “*carril*,” wherein it falls on the last). Individual words likewise “tickle” our ear: “myosotis” (the flower “forget-me-not”—*mē-ō-zō-’tis* in French and *mī-ə-’sot-əs* in English\*) is a good example, as are “coquelicot” (*kōk-lē-’kō*—the flower poppy—in French), *pikavaya dama* (*’pē-kä-’vā-yä ’dä-mä*—queen of spades—in Russian), “sayonara,” “Savonarola,” “Corregidor” and “Pleiku” (*plā-’kü*): horrible events took place in that city in Vietnam; yet, is it not pleasing to utter its name—Pleiku—and to hear it being uttered—Pleiku? In the English language, there is Shakespeare’s “melancholy Dane” and, irrespective of association and knowledge of meaning, the lilt of the sounds in such words and names as “Popocatepetl,” “Hippopotamus,” “Karsh of Ottawa,” “caraway seed and cod liver oil,” “eeny meeny miny moe,” “Whip ’n Chill,” “topsy-turvy,” “predicament” and, with the stress on the first and third syllable of both, “parafo and percodan” (the names of two potent drugs in the modern pharmacological armamentarium, which by their sound could pass for a picturesque pair of characters in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta). Leo Stein, in *Appreciation: Painting, Poetry and Prose*,† recounts that a man from Japan had said that “the most beautiful word in English was ‘cellar-door’ ” and that as soon as Stein heard this he remembered that “‘celadon,’ which is so much like it, had always seemed

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\* Merriam-Webster Pronunciation Symbols.

† Crown Publishers, New York, 1947, p. 38.

[to him] a word of unusual beauty." And we may all recall the delight we took in reciting Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," as I recall that when I first came to this country I was mesmerized by the song "Mairzy dotes and dozey dotes and liddle lamsy divey; a kiddly divey too, wouldn't you?" And the simple "Paoli Local," as a commuter line between Philadelphia and Paoli is known, even as we pronounce it, rolls off the tongue with such pleasing smoothness that it feels like a taste sensation, while its quasi-palatable sensuousness carries over to the rhythmic sound-waves that reach and are welcomed by our ear. This effect on our ear is, of course, the reason why it is so important commercially for a product to have what one calls a catchy name. From that point of view, "Pepsi-Cola" and "Coca-Cola" have it all over "Welch's Grape Juice"; "peppermint" and "Cocillana Cough Nips" have it all over "Thanthis" or "Smith's Cough Drops." Between the names "Kate Dunathan" and "Katy Dunathan," the latter offers the greater satisfaction to our senses; indeed, the former trips up our ear and our tongue, which cannot comfortably manage the adjacent sounds of the dental consonants "t" and "d," while the sound of the intervening "y" of the latter provides a bridge over which our tongue may, as it were, lightly dance, to its own and our ear's delight. A former student of the Foundation was most felicitously named Sara Sue Fawcett, which, by its pattern of sounds, its cadence, is almost as gratifying to our ear as "Sioux City Sue." And other students' names: Betsey Bates and Miranda Marvin—each, again, a pleasure to the ear. In the same vein, I used to enjoy asking for a cough medicine called "Hexilresorcinol" (with the stress on the first and fourth syllables), but I only reluctantly bought it after the name was changed to "Sucrets." The Bible story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego perhaps owes some of its popularity to the melodic succession of the sounds themselves; indeed, Abednego alone is as enchanting to the ear as is "liddle lamsy divey."

Euphony is the word for pleasing sounds, and in poetry it is, quite naturally, of the greatest importance. Note, for instance, the pattern of beats and combinations of sounds in



the following from "The Eve of St. Agnes" by John Keats, in particular the harmonious sound sequence of the last line:

And still she slept in azure-lidded sleep,  
 In blanch'd linen, smooth, and lavender'd  
 While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
 With jellies smoother than the creamy curd,  
 And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;  
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

And, as a simpler instance, the ear-charming sound juxtapositions in a piece of the poem "The Song of the Scallop Shell," the very title of which is alliteratively captivating, by Hebe Bulley, one of our alumnae:

I scintillate among the rocks,  
 I quiver through the water;  
 I touch a spark of Apollo's dart  
 And scatter the sunbeams over.

However, "pecks of pickles pep up packers" or "she sells seashells on the seashore" and "unmanned man-made moons," not unlike "Smith's Cough Drops," are tongue twisters, ear-befuddlers; they get our ear reception entangled, with no "pat of butter" for relief. So, too, are some pictures eye-dazzlers, eye-befuddlers; they get our eye entangled, as do, for instance, Klee's "Little World" (Plate 89) and, to a lesser degree, Toyokuni's woodcut, "Standing Figure" (Plate 77).

It is because the decorative satisfies what in us craves unhampered use of our avid senses that it has an undeniable effect on, a power over, us. We shall buy that red belt, in spite of the reasoning us. In a shoe store, the pump pinches our toe, but it is what we call "attractive," and we are, therefore, so easily convinced, so willing, even hoping, to be convinced that we should spend our last penny on that pair of shoes. As a parallel, a speaker with a mellifluous voice is bait to our ears, and we are thus so willing to take what he

says as gospel truth, whether it is or not. A writer with a smooth, graceful style is easier to read, hence is read more enthusiastically, than is one whose prose is dry or harsh; from this point of view, but without reference to content, Bertrand Russell and Santayana easily outdo John Dewey. An easily heard, flowing delivery is also commonly found amidst radio commentators, political campaigners and professional "word slingers," the last of whom abound among lecturers and writers on art and, as we might expect, effortlessly catch the unwary public by a style that may be relatively devoid of substance. In like manner, the unwary public is entertained, entranced, ensnared by the "slingers of color pattern," "pattern manufacturers," such as Léger (*e.g.*, Plate 31) and, at times, Picasso (*e.g.*, Plates 101 and 102), such "Abstract Expressionists" as de Kooning (*e.g.*, Plate 103) and a horde of so-called nonobjective painters, as exemplified by Hans Hofmann (*e.g.*, Plate 86).

As intimated above, the factor of appealing to our senses is of primary importance for commercial purposes. Promotional posters and advertisements must and do aim at addressing the public's eye, to which they hand, as to our butler, a card of introduction for whatever they sell. And what our eye acknowledges, so too do we, if tentatively at first; but we are only human, and, having let our eye be enticed, we are likely to follow suit. Indeed, for many, to read the blurb, to hear the jingle is practically to buy the product, for it is through the decorative bait that we get to know one product and not another which *we* might have preferred or which is actually of higher quality.

In the case of a genuine artist, the decorative is not deliberately resorted to as mere bait, but occurs as an adjunct to other effects in his use of his chosen medium. Since, however, by its nature and ours, the decorative functions as bait, it should be, and by the artist is, given serious consideration. The moral of the lesson thus far is that, because of the effect of the decorative on us by way of our senses, we should never underestimate its power. We ought also to add that neither should we overestimate it. For, when a situation is only or mostly just bait, it remains at the level of mere decoration or sense titillation, and, when our mind comes into play, we come to our sorrow: we find the red belt to be



worse than flimsy, the whiskey to be nothing but liquid fire, the shoe to hurt our toe, and now to hurt us for our having succumbed to, fallen for, its decorative appeal. In pictures, too, when there is a superabundance of decorative material,\* we experience a similar final frustration because we discover only an empty shell with, however pleasing the exterior, no substance to feed us. This is exemplified in varying degree and manner when the decorative character of one or more element—the strokes in van Gogh's "Self-Portrait with Grey Hat" (Plate 79), the light-and-dark contrast in Benton's "Invasion" (Plate 38), the lines in "The Madonna and Child with Infant St. John and Two Angels" (Plate 93), attributed to Filippino Lippi—is played at the expense of what it could do beyond itself, a pictorial excess no less irksome to our sensibilities than would be a pattern of protruding rivets in a building that catch our attention but tear our clothes as we walk by.†

Thus, the decorative, as we saw, is that aspect of the world on which, independently of any merit it may have from the point of view of meaning to us, our senses can function freely and easily. In other words, and to repeat, our senses are thirsty for the decorative; it gratifies *them*, whether or not it gratifies *us*.

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\* By "superabundance" we do not mean a great amount (a painter like Renoir is, among other things, highly decorative), but an excess—*i.e.*, an abundance that overwhelms the container, as, for instance, when color brightness or linear activity takes over the picture situation or when the eye-attractive packaging leads us to a container empty of contents.

† The fact should be made clear, and perhaps goes without saying, that the descriptions we have made of the behavior of our eye and our other senses represent only *tendencies* to action. Indeed, the endless, often complex, variables that usually occur in what in nature competes for and lays claim to our senses' attention, as well as the variables in our individual sense receptiveness, preclude any dependable prediction of how our senses will behave at a given confrontation: whether, for example, the rhythmic relationship between the circular shapes of any of the series of plates we have illustrated (*e.g.*, Plate 24) will dominate the sense registration of the situation or whether the greater attractiveness of one plate will effectively eliminate the others from our eye's attention depends on so many factors that no guarantee of what *will* happen can be made. Nevertheless, the basic argument, that sense satisfaction is inherent in the act of sensing, does obtain, and it was, throughout the text, at the root of, as it also lent substance to, the various demonstrations and affirmed their essential validity.

We should, at this point, remark that the decorative, the sensuously appealing, while affording the senses the opportunity of functioning and the possibility of enjoying functioning, is not in itself aesthetic. The pleasure that may attend mere sensation—our enjoyment of a cool breeze against the skin, of the scent of a flower, of the colorfulness of certain objects, etc.—as such involves very little of us: it does not engage our personality, does not occur as a meaning of the thing encountered, but, instead, exists as a subjective feeling; it requires no act of perception on our part, no awareness with understanding, no interpretation in the light of experience. In short, it lacks significant connection with its external source.

In addition, the pleasure elicited by the decorative, insofar as it remains nothing more, represents a one-way action in the interchange between us and the outside world—*viz.*, an action of the environment on us. Since it does not involve our understanding, our perceiving, it is not objectifiable, not able to be communicated, but only able to be indicated—as it is when we use such words to describe the effect of something on us as “beautiful,” “wonderful” or we “like” it, all of which gives evidence of what is felt within but not of the nature of what existed without: as the poet said, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

Aesthetic satisfaction, on the other hand, as we have implied, involves our entire personality, and it resides both in things and situations *and* in our experience of them. It represents a two-way action, a trans-action, between us and our environment. And, because this transaction derives from the actuality of what we sense, its meaning can be transferred, communicated in the qualities of an expressive medium. Thus, while, true enough, aesthetic experience involves pleasure, it is an intellectual, a perceptual, as well as a sensuous, pleasure. That is to say, it is of us as well as of the thing registered.

Sensation is, of course, the forerunner of and the stimulus to perception, and the decorative is, correspondingly, instrumental to aesthetic experience. When such experience occurs, the decorative is no longer merely decorative, the pleasure it provides no longer merely feeling; they become a



component, a meaning, of the perceived, the aesthetically satisfying, object.

Dr. Albert C. Barnes compared the sensuousness of the decorative with the sense of being in good health, of feeling well. This observation opens the way to an important additional point in our study of the decorative. What is the real value or merit of feeling well? Merely to enjoy it sensuously? No. Rather, that we are then able to accomplish something worthwhile better because we can do so more easily than when we are not well. And the decorative, like the sense of well-being, while also in itself pleasurable, acquires its import from the significance of what, as a means, it enables us to achieve; for, by its nature and its effect on us, the decorative has the power to set things running easily, smoothly on by serving to make things more palatable.

There is, of course, as we have already indicated in various ways, also the factor of *us*—that is, us as distinct from our independent senses—that must be considered in our discussion of perception. If, for example, we had both a black-and-white photograph and a color reproduction of a painting, our eye would tempt us to study the color print, although *we* know how the reproduced colors can fool us as to the nature of the original. We are, moreover, more than a collection of senses and more than a receptacle for our sense reports: we are able to enjoy things intellectually as well as sensuously. In the first place, we have been, as adults, in charge of our senses for a number of years; we have been their master, more or less intelligently, and we have necessarily seen to it as much as we could that they be at *our* service, that they act according to *our* interests, desires, preferences. In other words, we have, at least to some extent, trained them to go to and get what *we* want from the world, commanded them to skip over what does not interest *us* and to find and dwell on what does. Thus it is that, under our control and directive, our eye and the other senses develop, over the years, ways, habits of acting—mine, his, yours—that are in accord with *us* as opposed to our sensory organs alone; my eye, for instance, will find me the blue belt rather than the red one: we *teach* our senses,

and our eye then sees what it has learned to see. That, too, is what we mean by saying that our senses are "sharpened"; we, knowing what might be there for them to see, direct them to see it, to focus on it. All this modifies our previous observations, although it does not cancel or destroy them: my eye may still spot first the red belt.

We now come to the rôle of the second phase of perception in qualifying our eye's activities, *viz.*, how *we*, with our interests, feelings, backgrounds, etc., affect the material registered and reported to us by our senses. It is not our senses which give meaning; *we* do. We receive the reports, and we act back at, re-act to, them and on them with what is in us, with what makes up our personalities as we receive the registered and reported material. When, for example, our eye is caught by the red roof in van Gogh's "Thatches in the Sunshine" (Fold-out Plate 92), it does not report "red," but only sends us specific wavelengths of light. It remains, then, for our mental "clerk" or "page boy" to take over, to riffle through our mental files, to match those wavelengths with what we have encountered before and to pin on them the label under which they were classified—"red," "*rouge*," "*rosso*," depending on the language we speak. And we, with the identity of that red thus established, act back on the sense report with the knowledge that organic unity requires that sufficient essential matter be found in common among the constituents of any given situation and attach the label "jumpy red"; we call it a hole, a break in the texture of the color composition. In other words, the labels, the meanings, do not come from our eyes, but from our reacting to, acting back at, in terms of our emotions, our intellect, our past experiences, the sense report. A more complex reaction can be traced, as for instance, when our eyes report the specific wavelengths of light in Cézanne's "Valley of the Arc (Mont Ste-Victoire Seen from Bellevue)" (Plate 52). In this case, we say "green," as we have learned to do with similar reports, but our background also contributes something to the identity of the present report, and we add "Courbet's green, but, no, now altered by a context of Pissarro's terra cotta, but, again no, now presented in patches and planes." Furthermore, because Cézanne does some-



thing that we cannot completely match up with previous sense reports—provided our background holds adequate relevant information—our final label includes the quality “new,” “personal”—a label that was, indeed, in the making as we started to react to the first eye report. We, as responsive beings, are further able to observe, as our eye was not, that in the Cézanne painting there are no decorative factors serving only as enticing bait—here, as incongruous a speculative conjunction as a lace bib on a work-horse or café curtains on the Parthenon. In Cézanne, that’s that, with no frills or fussy, extraneous, captivating bait. From this we can conclude that the decorative color, light, shapes have been selected with sober restraint, for a purpose beyond their own native sensuous appeal. They were selected from all the possible ones known to Cézanne, were set down for the sake of the direct, novel sequence of staccato beats and the qualities of power and austerity pressed out or expressed from the mountain, from the fields and from Cézanne.\*

The decorative, when selected to serve an end beyond itself, is, of course, expressive, and the expressive, reaching us, as it must, through our senses, is also more or less decorative. A confusing dilemma? Not really. But we shall have to clear it up by considering the specific and possibly varying relationships between the decorative and the expressive in a variety of circumstances.

First, both the decorative and the expressive are not parts, but aspects of the entity they belong to and make up. The difference between aspects and parts of a thing is a simple, and an important, one. In a chair, I can remove a leg or a spindle from the whole, and that leg or spindle remains what it was; it can exist by itself, apart from the rest of the chair, and yet retain its own identity. Likewise, the rest of

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\* See analysis of “Valley of the Arc,” Violette de Mazia, “Expression,” *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, Vol. V., No. 2, (Autumn, 1974), The Barnes Foundation Press, Merion, Pa., pp 17 to 31.

The manner of using the decorative elements described above is a distinctive characteristic of the artist Cézanne. Other artists, such as Renoir and Matisse, selected from the possible decorative elements with different intellectual and emotional sensitivities and for different picture purposes. In Renoir, for example, the interest in the sensuous appeal of the means is on a par with that in the illustrative and expressive aspects of the painting; in Matisse, the decorative is emphasized and serves as the embodiment of ideas of color, composition, etc., and of the artist’s distinctive vision of the traditions.

the chair continues to exist, although now minus the leg or spindle. The spindle or leg is, then, simply a *part* of the chair, one of the many pieces or parts that make up the object we identify as a chair. An *aspect*, on the other hand, involves the aggregate, the sum, of all the features that distinguish a thing as a whole when that whole is considered from a particular point of interest. A chair, for example, may be regarded as a seat, as a stepladder, as a product of the modern furniture factory, as a given version of a seventeenth-century chair. While we can consider each of these aspects of the chair in turn, we cannot physically separate it from the whole, as we can a part, and still have an entity; for, if we take all that represents one aspect, we take all that the object or situation is as viewed from a particular point of interest.

Accordingly, in a clearly-conceived piece of work, *i.e.*, in an integrated organization, the expressive and the decorative, while not synonymous, are nevertheless interrelated constituents, or aspects, of each other, as they are of the total thing which together they make up. Indeed, the decorative is expressive of its own qualities—angularity of shape, vividness of color, gentleness of light, boldness of contrast, richness of color chords, etc.—and these qualities, consequently, are integrated in the expressive identity of what embodies them. Thus, the color of a stone, the vein of marble, the weave of burlap, the swirling pattern of burl, the straight-grained pattern of pine wood are all decorative qualities, all belong to the decorative aspect of the embodying items; but they are at the same time, one with what says or means that stone, that marble, that textile, that burl, that wood.\*

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\* Perhaps the nature of the distinction between the decorative and the expressive aspects might be clarified by considering whether three-dimensional space be in itself decorative. Three-dimensionality is not registered as such by our eye. Indeed, perception of it derives from our experiences—moving, touching, reaching, etc.—after which our mind correlates knowledge of three-dimensionality with features such as light and dark, size, intercepting planes, etc., that are registered by the eye. Space, then, is decorative according to its contents of decorative material: glowing light in the distance in Claude le Lorrain (*e.g.*, Plate 53), the rhythm and pattern of shapes and of light and dark that to us indicate intervals in a recession of units, as so often occur in Henri Rousseau (*e.g.*, Plate 99), the color-chorded atmosphere in Renoir (*e.g.*, Plate 97), the colorful bands that striate distant skies in Paolo Veronese (*e.g.*, Plate 100) and so on.



One aspect may be more prominent than another in determining the character of the whole thing, such as is the pattern of the burl as a decorative aspect of a bowl (Plate 26) as against the straight grain as a simpler decorative aspect of a pine-wood box (Plate 27). Moreover, there is a varying degree of integration, and there are varying ways and levels of human significance at which integration takes place. The plain chair, reproduced on Plate 68, is decorative only because of the natural characteristics of the material used and the inevitable pattern that results from its use. In other words, the purpose that dictated the appearance of the chair was essentially practical, functional in nature, and the minimal decorative elements are incidental to the effect or meaning of the chair as a whole. The Connecticut Windsor chair, seen on Plate 69, is—with the exception of the bamboo notches, which give the effect of having been applied on, rather than being integral with, the pieces they embellish—decorative by the characteristics, such as the outward flare of the back and the curve of the crest rail above a “bird cage”—characteristics not required by the practical purpose of the chair—given to its own organic makeup; that is to say, these features are constructively, functionally, decorative. The arrow-back chair illustrated on Plate 70, as opposed to this, while inherently decorative in its structural members—the arrow-shaped spindles, for instance, and the cut-out top splat and the backward curve and the projecting “ears” of the sides of the back, which, as in the Connecticut chair, are *of* the chair’s very construction—is also *decorated*, ornamented will say it, too, with colorful lines, scrolls, and stylized leaves that pattern much of the chair’s yellow-painted surface, in itself already a decorating adjunct. Although what *decorates* is, perforce, also *decorative*, it is not *of* the structure of the object, it is not structural, but rather, is an extraneous, superimposed embellishment, not unlike what the sprig of parsley is to the steak or what the flower in the buttonhole is to the jacket. The effect corresponds in this respect to that of such “decorated” units as the foreground area of drapery in Sloan’s “Reclining Nude with Green Scarf” (Plate 48, Detail Plate 49), with its color dabs and splotches superimposed on the basic color of the area. Other instances include the foremost cottage in van Gogh’s “Thatches in the

Sunshine" (Fold-out Plate 92), with the jumpy, non-organic, red of its roof; many of the areas in van Gogh's "Self-Portrait with Grey Hat" (Plate 79), with their ubiquitous episodes of obviously patterning, non-integrated brush strokes; and, on occasion although to a much lesser degree, gobs of high-key pigment in the late work of Renoir (*e.g.*, Plate 97). In these cases, the strictly decorating elements fail to reach beyond what they are as such, *i.e.*, beyond themselves; they remain splotches of color, color areas, brush strokes, pieces of high-key pigment: although eye-catching, eye-appealing in themselves, they are not built in and, therefore, do not make for constructive, structural, organic decorativeness. They are *on*, rather than *of*, what they decorate.\*

Further, one thing may, because of the nature of its decorative aspect, be more *directly* decorative, yet not be *more* decorative, than another. In general, for example, it can be safely assumed that, in a comparison of a painting by Matisse of his fauvist period (*e.g.*, Plate 28) or one by Léger (*e.g.*, Plate 31) with one by Renoir from the middle or late 1870s or done after 1888 (*e.g.*, Plate 29) the Matisse would be the more directly decorative, the Léger the more merely decorative and the Renoir the most decorative and,

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\* We might here refer back to the saucers and plates of our earlier demonstration and now be precise: the saucers and plates (excepting the trenchers and the plain pewter plate), apart from their shape, are, like the arrow-back chair mentioned in the text, decorative for being decorated; they are not organically, inherently, constructively decorative, as are, for instance, the burl bowl, the veined marble and, in general, the paintings by such artists as Titian, Tintoretto, Renoir, Cézanne and Matisse, in whose work the patterns, the colors, the rhythms are one with, integrated in, the substance which they enhance. Compare from this standpoint Matisse's "The Riffian" (Plate 104)—its interplay of large, boldly contrasted, vividly intense, saturated color planes that portion off the space as they build up a simple yet striking three-dimensional organization, and the focalizing "coasters" on the hood and sleeves and colorful "cup plates" down the middle of the figure's garment—or Renoir's "Nude, Back View" (Plate 98)—an uninterrupted, fluid symphony of color chords that impart their richness, subtlety and delicacy to the structurally deep substance of the volumes and space which they help to build up—with either Hofmann's "Magazine Cover—Untitled" (Plate 86) or Kandinsky's "Composition 8" (Plate 32)—each, little more than a decorated piece of canvas. Our eye, nevertheless, does not discriminate. It is not in *its* power to distinguish between the inherently and the superficially decorative; it is, rather, in *ours*.



consequently, the most lastingly eye-rewarding, of the three. Again, as we intimated earlier in this essay, the sleeve in El Greco's "Vision of St. Hyacinth" (Detail Plate 64) is more directly decorative, more immediately eye attracting, than is the fold in Cézanne's "Skull and Fruit" (Detail Plate 63), while the latter, with its more complex offering of patterning colors, tones and shapes, is more decorative.

The question obviously revolves around how and to what extent the decorative merges with the expressive. It should, therefore, be of interest and value to examine the varying ways in which, in objects of daily life as well as in works of art, such major constituent aspects as the expressive, the decorative and, also, the illustrative, which we discussed in an earlier essay\* relate to, dovetail with, each other and are integrated in the whole which they together make up, and the consequent variations in overall characteristics and identity that ensue. This problem will be the principal concern of our next study.

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\*Violette de Mazia, "The Case of Glackens *vs.* Renoir," *The Barnes Foundation Journal of the Art Department*, Vol. II, No. 2, (Autumn, 1971), The Barnes Foundation Press, Merion, Pa., pp. 3-30.

# A Role of Society in Creative Endeavor

by EUGENIA WOOLMAN\*

IT IS an aesthetic requirement in all creative expression that the artist maintain the highest sensitivity to human values if his work is to be significant as art. That is, he must be both passionately and subjectively involved in the activities that spring from human drives, needs, fears, and hopes. Since the environment provides the material upon which these activities are founded and through which they acquire actuality, the creator, the artist, cannot hope to function effectively unless he is able to respond as a part of the society of his time.

There is no question that twentieth-century technology, with its emphatic industrialism and materialism, tends to smother our sense of the value of individuality as a feature of things and people. Because the artist's job is to discover those qualities that heighten human experience, qualities which, in part, depend on the worth of individuality, we well may question whether significant creative expression is possible in these times. Can one paint, write, or compose in terms of creative values when nearly everything we see or own is a machine-made object and when electricity serves, for all practical purposes, as our sun and moon?

A work of art may, of course, be embodied in any material from the artist's culture. Most of the articles that result from man's inventiveness are, however, mere artifacts rather than works of art; their interest lies in the fact that they serve as documents of the culture that produced them and not in the fact that they embody values that belong to all ages, *i.e.*, not in the fact that they have meaning by virtue of their own makeup. The tendency to turn out mere artifacts instead of art is obviously encouraged by a society that

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emphasizes technological progress, that glorifies the "ready-made," and that assuages the creative impulse by purveying number-painting kits and factory-drawn sampler patterns—in other words, a society that values things rather than meanings.

Much that has been turned out by would-be practitioners of the arts in today's society reflects our general preoccupation with things. Claes Oldenburg's gigantic tumescent ice bag, which occupies a place in the sculpture garden of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a notable example. It is simply a large cartoon of a factory-made object and derives what meaning it has from our recognition of the item portrayed. Novel it is, but without a vestige of aesthetic significance; ignore its reference to a genuine ice bag, and it becomes only an ill-shaped mass, a formation devoid of meaningful visual qualities. The cans of Campbell's soup neatly and patiently portrayed by Andy Warhol constitute another instance of artifact-making. Again, the pictured soup can has only the meaning of the object as a familiar item presented in a novel way. Apart from the fact that it shows us something we are acquainted with, the painting is meaningless—a monotonous pattern of lifeless colors.

The uncreative use of the things of modern society illustrated above can be contrasted to a creative response to our manufactured items that occurred when Europeans first introduced soup in cans and other tinned products into Africa: the native carvers fell upon the containers with the enthusiasm of discovery; but instead of treating these cans as ready-made components that merely needed rearrangement to turn them into art, they used them as raw material, as material with characteristics that could be made to carry expressive ideas, cutting and beating them into shapes that embody qualities belonging to organized three-dimensional masses and volumes. As a result, the existing artistic tradition of African sculpture took on a fresh look, without any loss of its content of aesthetic values and with the infusion of the new qualities that the metallic characteristics of the raw material allowed for. And the rigid, formidable drama drawn out of the cans by the African artists endures, for we, as human beings, respond to such

meanings, whatever the time and place, whatever the material, whatever the subject.

At present, we have, indeed, a marvelous array of materials at our disposal—fiberglass, acrylics, epoxies, resins, plastics, alloys, neon tubes, aluminum, etc.—which are, no doubt, capable of being utilized with the same creative insight as the African sculptors brought to the cans and, therefore, which offer a similar opportunity for refreshing our own aesthetic tradition. In fact, however, these materials are seen, for the most part, only as the things they have been made into, rather than as the raw stuff of creation, and the men who work with them, probably inevitably, retreat into a position of antagonistic criticism—using the finished products of society as the subject of satire, caricature, or, as did Oldenburg and Warhol, buffoonery. And, because it is the nature of the thing and not the nature of its qualities that is drawn upon for the statement, the resulting pictorial or sculptural ridicule fails even as genuine communication. It does not provide insight by way of its intrinsic identity, the specific organization of its components of color or mass, but relies entirely on our recognition of the identity of the thing portrayed to make its point. That is, it possesses no meaning in and of itself: it is an artifact, not art. Correspondingly, the only way one can approach an interpretation of the work of most of the current painters and sculptors is from a non-visual point of view, as, for example, through Freudian concepts, esoteric codes, and accompanying verbal indicators, such as titles.

The creative person is he who is able to discover the abiding human values in the things of his own time. That this is possible even today in terms of products of a technologically oriented society is shown by the American poet Whitman who, in “singing the body electric,” was only repeating—although in a different context, with different materials, therefore, with new meaning—values that a Greek artist might have dealt with on his vases. And, in fact, among the practitioners of the arts of today, there are a few men who have escaped the seductive power of our technological orientation. The painter Matta, perhaps one of the few masters of the twentieth century, captured with



abstract patterns something of the aesthetic qualities that belong to our present technological age. This came to me not too long ago when, walking through a resort town very late at night, I saw at a distance one of the local bars, with its red and blue fluorescent lights gleaming in the mist. I was struck with its particular visual character and realized of a sudden that, indeed, there are abiding values in the things of our time and that an artist's eye, in this case, Matta's, had opened me up to some of them.

The fact that a special vision may be shared and extended by the sharer into his own world is a part of the creative vitality of a genuine work of art. The imitator, the reproducer of things such as Warhol and Oldenburg, strikes no chord of emotion, for to transmit experience one must tap a relevant store of qualities, not simply present a novel version of known objects.

The preceding principle is not exclusively a provision of aesthetic actuality. Even so remote a field as politics offers an illustration of its application: in the sixties, after President John Kennedy was elected and his cabinet had been formed, it was reported that the new vice-president, Lyndon Johnson, met with his old friend and mentor Sam Rayburn to boast about the men whom Kennedy was gathering together to govern the country. After Mr. Johnson had finished describing the new cabinet members in rather glowing terms, there was a pause. Then Mr. Rayburn said thoughtfully, "I sure wish one of 'em had at least once run for county sheriff." This astute politician knew about human imperatives. He knew the abrasive requirements of running for and being in public office, and one can assume he had small trust in theorists and experts who had never participated in nor felt the reality of a people's campaign.

Finally, we might note that the world of experience is never absolutely consistent: every person, human event, or natural thing is unique. No person arising in the morning to the most rigid schedule can ever repeat it the following day; no baseball game played on the identical diamond with the same team members duplicates the action of the day before; nor can two apples growing on a single tree be compared for absolute consistency in shape and color.

Machinery, however, produces consistent objects: a bolt factory turns out thousands of identical bolts; a textile mill weaves miles of goods in a given pattern; and a printing press produces tons of printed words with not a hint of the variety that calligraphy affords. Similarly in art, once it has been done, it is easy to paint large canvases of striped color, tidy and clean-lined boxes within boxes, rows of soup cans. Such works are ultimately inane; they mimic the output of machines and offer little visual nourishment or excitement.

It is, perhaps, the task of the philosopher-intellectual to criticize and refocus our technology toward more human endeavors. The artist, too, is a critic, but a critic who must go beyond mere representation or symbolic analysis of the implements he lives among. His task is to interpret what he finds in terms reflective of universal experience so that the new entity can be shared by all human beings able to respond to the values it discloses.



## HAIKU FOR A DAY IN MAY

*by* PATRICIA NEUBAUER\*

All night demons lurked  
and moaned in the black pine, but  
at daybreak birds sang.

\* \* \* \*

Double-hearted: which  
this morn of Harlequin May—  
painting, poetry?

\* \* \* \*

I climb the high hill;  
the wind rides on my shoulder  
and sings me a song.

\* \* \* \*

Green turf, gold-spangled,  
dandelions or goldfinch  
flock—I do not know.

\* \* \* \*

A white butterfly  
flirting with my drawing pad,  
fluttering in vain.

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Hills turn amethyst,  
dusk darkens the wood, topaz  
windows tell of home.

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\* Alumna of the Art Department.

# Vincent van Gogh: A Fiction?

by HARRY SEFARBI\*

THE “Nude” (Fold-out Plate 58)† by Vincent van Gogh in The Barnes Foundation collection stops visitors short. Some are surprised by it—a nude by this painter is unexpected; others are outraged: “the one really coarse van Gogh (a stockinged nude) I have ever seen,” declared critic Emily Genauer in a newspaper article—the outrage somehow directed at Dr. Barnes rather than at the artist. Why does it offend? Is it its nakedness? Its artlessness? Or is it really that it does not conform to the popular legend that surrounds the man who painted it? Vincent “was a painter of peasants . . . whose lives, like his own, were burdened with care” (Meyer Schapiro). This painting goes in the face of history.

And what is more elusive than history—especially the history of art, in which paintings are seen as footnotes to social and political events of the past? Only the lives of the painters seem to matter, all somehow following a set pattern: great sensitivity accompanied by sore affliction, the desire to paint met by family opposition, unrecognized talent, economic difficulties, posthumous recognition. This is the framework of a story everyone knows—and expects.

Vincent van Gogh is a case in point. It always comes as a surprise to realize that his entire painting career lasted a total of ten years, the length of time usually needed merely to prepare a son or daughter for one of the professions. His poverty was more imagined than real: it was the poverty of all students who must depend on an allowance. Far from suffering from family opposition, he was actually supported financially by a brother, who, as an art dealer, was in a position to understand the nature of Vincent’s talent.

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\* Member of the Art Department Teaching Staff.

† For the reader’s convenience in following the analytical discussion, the reproductions of this picture and van Gogh’s “Postman” (Plate 81) and “Thatches in the Sunshine” (Plate 92), studied later in this essay, appear on fold-outs that can be exposed while the text is being read.



Nor did this talent go unnoticed by the painters and collectors whom the artist met or who knew him through his brother. There were some sales during what could be considered the time of Vincent's apprenticeship, as well as painting exchanges—a form of both recognition and compensation—with artists who admired his work. Ultimately, just prior to his death, he was invited to exhibit with a group devoted to the advanced in art, at which time his work received favorable critical notice.

But what does the world choose to believe about this man? That his desire to paint arrived suddenly and comparatively late in life, after he had lost his chance at a pulpit because of his excessive religious zeal. That, having quarrelled with his father, he was forever dependent on the support of a brother. That, after having mutilated himself by slicing off all or part of an ear, he was assigned to a lunatic asylum. That, despondent over his lack of success, he committed suicide. That, after a lifetime plagued with trials, during which he sold few, if any, paintings, he achieved posthumous recognition. It fits the pattern. Exquisitely. Like Utrillo, Modigliani, Toulouse-Lautrec, among others, he is loved for the artist's role he so perfectly played. And so, although his work is hardly better understood than is theirs, throngs now crowd the exhibitions of his paintings; and, like theirs, his work now commands prices that dazzle the world and lend status to buyer and seller, and—happy ending—bring glory to his descendants.

Vincent van Gogh's writings are preserved in the almost daily letters that he wrote to his younger brother, Theo. How wonderful to have these documents that prove what the public has always known about painters. Not only could he write "I feel faint" and "I am literally starving," giving a sense of immediacy to his appeals for money, but also, "I am thinking of accepting explicitly my role as a madman." Hunger and madness—his fate was truly that of an artist.

It may be, however, that the life of Vincent van Gogh fits the painter's legendary pattern too perfectly; it is as though Vincent the letter writer also knew what is expected of the artist. Perhaps Vincent van Gogh the painter is a fiction—

a fiction created in his letters by Vincent van Gogh the writer and accepted at face value by a public who dotes on bohemian artists and who sees his paintings as illustrations for his letters. "This was his bedroom." "Look! His bandaged ear!" "Was that one his mistress?"

These are letters written by a man who read a great deal, and who saw his position as dramatic—out of Dickens or Zola perhaps, authors he read and re-read. Consciously or unconsciously, the letters were created to project the character of a troubled, dedicated artist, at once hard-working and deserving, and were designed to show him to be worthy of his brother's continued support. The writing is such that it not only led Theo to keep the letters; it also won over the worldwide audience invited by his relatives to share it. The same persuasiveness that held Theo bound captured the public. (Indeed, Theo may have preferred the image created in the letters arriving from afar to the reality that he had known in Paris: after Vincent quit his brother's apartment, Theo only saw him at firsthand, for the most part, in emergencies.)

The pictures, unlike the letters, are records of Vincent's experience as a painter—what he responded to and how he responded, as well as moments of change and the evidence of the direction that his development took. Although paintings can lessen or grow in meaning as they are experienced by subsequent generations, the paint on the canvas remains largely as the painter left it. The letters, on the other hand, are subject to translation and are often edited with an eye toward reinforcing the image that the public has taken to its heart.

And so this picture, this "Nude" by Vincent van Gogh in The Barnes Foundation collection, stops us like an affront, a contradiction to the legend. Instead of a peasant or a landscape, it presents a Parisian subject—a subject out of Ingres or Toulouse-Lautrec: a posed, stockinged, reclining nude.

Had Theo not been living in Paris, this painting would not have come into being in this form. Vincent, the country Dutchman, arriving in Paris with neglected and broken-off



teeth, having to be led straightway to a dentist to have the stumps repaired or replaced, must have appeared, for all the world, like a peasant out of a painting by his ancestor Bosch. And, like Bosch, Vincent, the Hollander recently of Antwerp, sees his subject with eyes sharpened by the Flemish-Dutch tradition. We are present at, and privy to, a moment of change: Dutch neophyte caught by French sophistication.

The character of the nude itself is not French. Rather, it recalls the nudes that we associate with Flemish painting: those of van Eyck or of his German "relatives" Cranach and Dürer, or of those who later were identified as Dutch—Rembrandt and Steen come to mind. Like theirs, Vincent's lacks the elegance of the idealized nudes of Classic Greece that we have come to expect in life-painting. Instead, we are presented with a thrust of the hips, full breasts, and the gross features of the face. The painting of pubic and under-arm hair seems overly frank: dark hatchings and bold brush strokes. Flemish and Dutch painters, Rubens and Hals among them, often indicate hair similarly, but with strokes precisely shaped and delicately placed. Vincent was never to have the skill of Hals, certainly not of Rubens, and, lacking their ability to dissimulate, presents us with a nude that comes across as unrefined and somewhat improper, but, at the same time, honest and gruff.

Much has been made of Vincent's indigence, for to lack money is part of the popular prototype of the artist. Vincent's pattern differs: he had Theo. "The condition that I want you to arrive at is that you should never have any worries. I must work for the money" (Theo). Between them, the brothers created the face-saving device that the money sent by Theo served to purchase the pictures Vincent painted; these then became the outright property of Theo. Thus, unlike most painters, indeed, unlike most people, Vincent never had the problem of finding money where he could. His source was guaranteed and was never to dry up. His constant complaints of poverty were part of his role-playing, designed to pry loose supplements to his allowance. And Theo must have known it, for he continued to ration out, in small sums, the money that he sent.

But Vincent's debt to Theo was more than one of money.

Theo had lived in Paris seven years, as part of its art world. Buying and selling the paintings of Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, Guillaumin, Degas—then only beginning to come into their own—Theo was able to give Vincent something more important than money: entrée into the avant-garde of the Paris of his day.

Vincent wrote his sister that he found impressionism ugly, sloppily and badly painted, badly drawn and of poor color. But to live and work in the heart of a movement is to have the eye quickened, wittingly or not, and, just as he learned to speak and to write his letters in French, so he began to “see” in French.

We do not need a list of the painters he met or whom he came to admire. This painting of the nude tells us. The heightened brightness, in contrast to the palette of his earlier “The Potato Eaters” (Plate 59) or of his lowland paintings in general, comes as a dramatic change: a flood of light to illuminate the world and alter its appearance. Obviously, he had met up with and been affected by Monet’s work or that of Sisley. The background drapery is made up of their apparent brush strokes that result in an active and sparkling area. The encrusted paint of the bed linen recalls the paint quality of the impressionist Pissarro, who was one of Theo’s clients. The juicy buds of paint that make up the coiffure of the nude, as well as the dark, wine-red lines on and around the face and head, are out of the work of Monticelli, a painter living and starving in Marseilles at that moment, but whose work was known in Paris.

The organization of the canvas indicates that Vincent had been made aware of the work of Paul Cézanne, *e.g.*, his “Leda and the Swan” (Plate 56). That painter, secluded in Aix, was recognized by the avant-garde of Paris of the 1880s and exerted considerable influence upon it. And, although Cézanne was not to burst upon the world for some twenty years, the “Nude” tells us that Vincent knew of him shortly after arriving in the capital. Vincent could only have seen his work in Paris at that time through Theo, who had led his brother there.

Like the canvases of Cézanne, van Gogh’s “Nude” is organized by the directions taken by the brush strokes. The strokes of the drapery, all vertical, contrast with the hori-



zontal ones that follow the lap of the bed. The parts of the body of the figure are made vibrant and given movement and direction in a similar manner. The pillow is made to sink beneath the head of the figure, and to radiate from it, by the directions taken by the brush strokes of which it is made. The bed moves to echo the swirl of the figure, while creating a ledgelike support to hold its mass and weight. This last, the step-up organization so familiar in Cézanne's work, gives the painting its ultimate balance and composure.

Vincent had also seen Seurat's paintings on his arrival in Paris and was to meet the painter himself before leaving that city for the South of France. The dark areas that make up the bed frame indicate this. What in his prior paintings, as in Dutch painting generally, might say black-brown, dark and light, now, reflecting the pastel tones of Seurat, speak nuances of color variations of browns and oranges. The obvious patterning of these areas also derives from the work of that painter. A similar range of color, as well as type of pattern, daintier and more sensitively varied, exists in Seurat's work, *e.g.*, "Port of Honfleur" (Plate 55).

The interaction between the Dutch and French traditions further indicates the nature of the experience that Vincent van Gogh was undergoing, thanks to his Paris-based brother. Peasant subjects are here replaced by nude *en déshabillé*, and the Flemish "as is" character is made to serve a classic pose. The impressionist brush strokes have combined with and transformed the Dürer-Rubens type hatchings.\* The Hals metallic flesh is now expressed by means of French pastel tones. The lowland naïveté is given an added sense of poignancy as a result of this obviously unschooled painter's grappling with avant-garde techniques. All of this contributes to the individuality of the painting.

That education can only be obtained in the classroom, to be measured in credits that add up to degrees, has been too often disproved to be rehashed here. Both Theo and Vincent had had the benefit of an art education that was both real

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\* Compare the parallel hatchings pervasive in Dürer's "St. Jerome" (Plate 90, Detail Plate 57), the areas of parallel hatchings found in hair and drapery, among other places, in Rubens' "David Playing on His Harp" (Plate 51), Detail Plate 91), and the patterns of brush strokes found in the paintings of Sisley, Monet, and Pissarro, with those seen in the van Gogh "Nude."

and relevant. Each was put to work in the picture business when he had reached sixteen years of age. Thus, Vincent spent his seven years of paid employment, to age twenty-three—the traditional years of higher education—among pictures. During that time, he was free to undergo chance influences, and in his letters he writes of his discoveries and of his likes and dislikes. It is always pointed out that when Vincent was rejected by Ursula, his English landlady's daughter, he became withdrawn and began to spend his time in museums. Whether frequenting museums is indicative of neurosis or not, it can be significant as experience for someone aspiring to become an artist, even though most art students spend their art-school years in studio classrooms learning a craft, often without real or sustained contact with great pictures, where the art in painting is to be found.

Unlike Vincent, Theo remained in the picture business. It made him something of a kingmaker, not only of his brother, but also of others in whose work he dealt. (After his death, Gauguin and Pissarro mourned his passing both as a friend and as someone who could have helped them out of their financial difficulties.)

Theo was drawn to the avant-garde by his business and educated by it through his interest. Impressionism and post-impressionism were the avant-garde of the day. Although the subjects of their canvases were often landscapes, recalling those of the Dutch painters of Theo's homeland, the French centered their interest on color and, then, pattern and shape and, always, new techniques. Creativity and individuality were recognized as the true measure of worth.\*

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\* If Theo's collecting was done with re-sale in mind, and if his immediate motivation was his twenty-five per cent (fifteen per cent with Gauguin), his contact with paint on canvas, and with the artists who put it there, was nonetheless direct and personal.

Living with and among paintings makes for familiarity with and understanding of not only markets and prices, but also the objects themselves; and, depending on the quality of these paintings and the sensitivity of the observer, the understanding can reach authoritative levels. This principle is at the heart of the teaching at The Barnes Foundation, where the students are in constant contact with paintings and other works of art. Although no actual painting is done at the school, the influences upon the individual are real. Many practicing artists, as well as teachers and collectors, have developed out of the program. And there have also been many who have used what they have learned to become, like Theo, dealers.



Furthermore, since Theo was the recipient of Vincent's work and thought, he shared his brother's vision as it developed. Picture by picture, he grew with him as he shared in the experience that created them. Vincent was to write him: "I tell you again that I shall always consider you to be something more than a simple dealer in Corots, that through my mediation you have your part in the actual production of some canvases which will retain their calm even in the catastrophe."

In the process, Theo's perception was sharpened and his taste refined: he became "an excellent critic and discriminating art lover." As a critic he could discourage Vincent from succumbing to Gauguin's and Bernard's symbolist tendencies: "Too obvious, too contrived, too intellectual." As a dealer, he could write to Gauguin, "The would-be buyer [of one of the artist's paintings] wants you to revise the shape of [that] hand a little, but without altering anything else in the picture."

Unlike many a parent in a parallel situation of providing for a fledgling artist, Theo was knowledgeable about painting and aware that he was not merely supporting an indigent brother. Even though he could not have anticipated the level that Vincent would reach, he could recognize the industry that resulted in the mass of work constantly being mailed him, as well as the quality of the work itself, both of which made his continued and complete support inevitable.

Despite the fact that Vincent was twenty-seven years old when he fully committed himself to painting, he had behind him a background of experience in art unparalleled by most art students. If at first his taste was literary and leaned toward the illustrative and the sentimental, it was because he was a literary person. His letters are proof of that. In addition, Dutch painting, out of which he grew, has a tradition of story-telling: soldiers and their women; housewives at their chores; even the still-life paintings have subsidiary vignettes—dewdrops, crawling insects, just-peeled lemons—put there in the spirit of fun or "facts-of-the-matter" interest. Vincent's "Nude," factual and illustrative to the point of being grossly graphic, is again in the Dutch tradition and lacks only some anecdotal matter—a chamber pot or a pair of slippers on the floor—to turn it into Dutch genre.

The draughtsmanship exhibited in this painting, while awkward, suggests the direction the artist was departing from and that he might have followed had he remained in Antwerp copying from the cast. His instincts, however, were too sure for such academicism and caused him to abandon that city. The conviction of the pose, the way the anatomy works—the sense of solidity and weight, combined with the swirling movement of the body—are unusual for him and are soon to be dropped in the interest of his real bent—decoration. And, although the nude remains naïvely factual, it is more three-dimensional than what is found in Monet's work, more compact than what is found in Pissarro's, and bolder than what is found in Seurat's.

Vincent arrived in France at a time when "clumsy" drawing could be seen as a virtue and gross distortions as meaningful; careful draughtsmanship could be academic and "perfection" meaningless. Pissarro had succumbed to Cézanne's vision; Monticelli had been heavily scumbling; Degas was expressing gruffness and strength by boldly digging into his drawings, as though to deny the French Academy's neo-classic prettiness. Here, in the "Nude," a sequence of dots outlines a hip, a red line separates the legs, hatchings create a pillow, a blue contour sets off a curtain, while the pervasive rhythms of variously colored, linear brush strokes entertain and distract the eye. The effect is one of variety. Vincent, from the Antwerp Academy, in the midst of his apprenticeship, had been sure enough to be able to write: "I think the fellows in the drawing class all work badly and in an absolutely wrong way."

Although the lines that delineate the features of this nude do lack the schooled skill of the academic contour, the personality of the drawing is neither the result of training nor a lack of it. In point of fact, van Gogh had had about the same amount of formal training as had Gauguin. But, more worldly, both as a man and as an artist, Gauguin was attracted to and able to pattern himself after the more sophisticated in art. Vincent was always to be unsophisticated in outlook and primitive in execution. On his arrival in Paris, he had enrolled at Cormon's studio, where he had planned to draw for three years; but, after a short time, he



left to work on his own. After all, one academy, in Paris or elsewhere, is like another, and he had written from Antwerp: "The nagging of those fellows at the Academy is often unbearable for they remain positively spiteful. . . 'First make a contour. Your contour isn't right. I won't correct it if you do your modeling before having seriously fixed your contour.' " He had been demoted to the beginners' class—in his absence, as it happened, for he had already departed Antwerp for Paris (over Theo's protest: he had tried to hold off Vincent's coming until June).

And, then, after two years with his brother, Vincent took off for Arles. From there the legend, interrupted by his stay in Paris, resumes. The letters begin again, now to flow northward instead of to the west, and the paintings followed in their wake.

Vincent arrived in the South of France enriched with the plastic dividends of his Paris sojourn—newly bright color supported by pattern and shape—as well as with the technical ideas current during the time of his stay there—the dots of pointillism, the illumination and brush work of impressionism, the flatness of Japanese woodcut prints. The attitudes that developed toward him in Arles must surely have been affected by the strangeness of his paintings—an outlander's vision, bizarre in that country town. Who there could have seen that what he was doing indicated his mastery of a whole body of new aesthetic material? Who would have cared that his encrusted canvases represented remarkable personal growth—an expansion of decorative ideas brought with him from the North?

The "Postman" (Fold-out Plate 81), a portrait bust of the Arles period, is made up of impasto strokes that stand out from the surface of the canvas. While they recall the strokes that pattern the "Nude," here they have become bolder and more flamboyantly obvious; indeed, what three-dimensionality the volume has is suggested more by the raised pigment, silhouetted against the washed-in setting, than by the use of shading and tone. The impasto thickness of the figure is echoed in the raised flowers that decorate the background, which are also made of strokes of heavy pigment laid on

tinted canvas. Our eyes respond to the physical texture—a relief of raised and flat surfaces—over and above the subject depicted.

This is not the painting of a frenzied or passionate man. Rather, it recalls the busyness of handwork and the routines of the crafts. Vincent might be practicing weaving or embroidery, as it were, each stitchlike stroke serving to work out the eye-catching patterns of garments and setting. The letters on the cap, POSTES, are repeated box-shapes, samplerlike, held between yellow-paint stripes. The artist's own name, Vincent, is a band of red calligraphy. Short, sure strokes delineate a flower, and more flowers and stems grow out of extended swirls. Impasto whiskers embellish cheeks of paint: strands of pigment shape one ringlet after another, all designed to become part of the heavily embossed curl-pattern rug of a beard.

Thus, the technique used in the "Nude"—impressionism made methodical—is continued but has now become bolder and more sure, as the three-dimensional solidity of the earlier painting is given up or lost, sacrificed to the artist's interest in decoration.

Coming from the rugged surface, the man-stare of the "Postman," fixed on us, suggests the set expressions found in Byzantine mosaic decorations. Those church murals, designed to remind the heart and educate the soul, serve also to entertain the eye, as their uneven, faceted surfaces of gold reflect candlelight and cause walls to vibrate in silence. Van Gogh's canvas similarly catches the light and scintillates like a jeweled object, lavishly encrusted, fashioned for sensuous enjoyment. And, recalling a mosaicist's placing stone after tiny stone, Vincent has patterned a face with cheek-clusters of red, perhaps pausing to hatch flower petals of pink onto the background or to insert blue-rosette eyes within red-outlined lids.

And then there is the impact of the color. The colorfulness, virtually non-existent in his Holland pictures and which made its appearance in his Paris work, has now become boldly executed excursions into nerve-tingling sensation. The brashness of the Paris Dutch-metal nude, grating against its French-pastel setting, has become,



in Arles, the discriminating Japanese-French, vivid blue-thickness, standing out from and in silhouette against the airy, oriental green. The juiciness of the blue, *that* blue, is set against the thin wash of *that* green. The dark intensity is seen against exotic luminosity. Gauguin-Manet richness is paired with a lean, "rice-paste" delicacy. Pale tone is pitted against powerful shade. How exciting it must have been to have had these relationships emerge, to have recognized them as what was wanted, perhaps as they happened.

The multicolored mosaic face, with its clusters of orange-red stones like rouge marks upon the cheeks, takes on a pervasive silver-metallic luster. The wine-red lines that we saw in the "Nude's" head have here been brightened to a Boucher red, tube strength, that picks up the lips, outlines the eyes, finds the ear. The patterned treatment of the brows of "Postman" is similar to that of "Nude," but for the greater subtlety and variety of the color of the later painting. The flowers of the background that recall the technique of impressionism are allowed to sparkle and pulsate against the green wash of the background. The yellow of buttons, stripes, and letters is in brash contrast to the judiciousness of the other colors—mere yellow paint, the work of the country-Dutch, unrefined van Gogh, that contrasts with the emerging Parisian-French Vincent.

However superficial they may be, the brush strokes generate an excitement that is metaphoric—values transferred from sound and movement. Sure, boldly painted at a steady clip, they "count-off" briskly and catch us with their rhythm and hold us with their imagery.

The flowers in the background radiate to flash and sparkle on their stems as they stalk and parade like stick figures, becoming parasoled geishas that maneuver about the head. The stolid mass of the figure reverberates with its "one! two! three! four!" strokes, that up-down, angle or curve on its surfaces. The beard appears as a freshet modeled in pigment, its ripples and eddies arrested in mid-flow as they collide with the all-in-step directions of the coat. Divorced from their rhythms, the patterns entertain like closely worked, thick threads of heavy crochet.

Although Vincent the man has always been presented as

high-strung and unbalanced, ill-fed and sick, the painting of Vincent the artist is healthy. It is pervaded with a sense of physical vitality—direct, done all at one go, carried off easily, and, one guesses, happily. Vincent himself appeared hale and strong to Theo's wife when she met him; no doubt misled by the letters, she had expected otherwise.

The "Postman" cannot be equated with the unstable Vincent of legend. As a painting, it is a positive statement of color and pattern. It is an affirmative consolidation of what the artist had most recently learned and represents the work of someone in the swing of the Paris scene, maintaining, as it were, contact by correspondence. The exotic combinations of color are those of Japanese prints, but here not rice-paper dry or paste-color thin. The brilliance is heightened French color-of-the-color vividness, strengthened by a gaudy, popular brightness—like that of a "chromo in a cheap shop." These, combined with a mosaic glitter, are made van Gogh-intense and saturated—exhilarating to the senses.

This, then, is not the work of a personality going downhill, whatever might have befallen the man, but, rather, of one growing in sensitivity to individual rhythms and to variety of rhythmic contrasts. The evidence here indicates a sureness of purpose, a control of technique, and a developing perception of the poetic possibilities of everyday things. (Who would think of painting his postman?) No more dissimulated than the Parisian nude, this portrait is arresting in its bold intensity and deliberate éclat—its repeated swirls, precise arabesques, and pronounced beats all open and forthright. Out of canvases such as this was to come van Gogh's celebrity; it was also from these happy wilds of exotic color and rhythmic patterns that the fauves were to spring.

Alone in Arles, Vincent had arrived.

Vincent left Arles for St. Rémy, after having first made arrangements to be put up at the lunatic asylum there. It is this move that leads the world to look for, and to find, evidence of madness in his pictures: according to Kenneth Turan, a writer who swallowed the van Gogh legend whole, "Elsewhere in the building [that houses The Barnes



Foundation collection] . . . is one of the perhaps half a dozen existing van Gogh nudes, so tortured and tormented it hurts to look at it.”\* And, again, by Peter and Linda Murray, “His [van Gogh’s] paintings done at St. Rémy and Auvers are vivid in colour and with writhing, flame-like forms in the drawing, completely expressive of his tormented sensibility.”† One wonders what the response of the world would have been had there been no letters, or had van Gogh’s letters not been preserved.

“Thatches in the Sunshine (Reminiscence of the North)”‡ (Fold-out Plate 92), a canvas done at Auvers, might have been more perceptively seen as purely decorative. The arabesques that encompass houses and field, accepted as evidence of passion and derangement by viewers matching legend and painting, might then have been recognized as deriving from Gauguin. These arabesques begin to appear in Vincent’s work only after the two men had shared the house in Arles and are an objective proof of learning rather than of psychosis; they are the result of an influence rooted in the medium rather than a distortion dictated by the emotions. Much of Gauguin’s work is characterized by repeated arabesques which have never been associated with madness; rather, they are seen as part of his painting’s decorative appeal, like that of the Japanese prints from which they were drawn. Vincent’s arabesques would perhaps also have been thought of as just such decoration had not his stay at St. Rémy stood in the way of the objectivity of his public.

The cottages, green-thatched and blue-shuttered, with yellow sun behind a red, red roof, would be seen as being closer to what is found in a fairy-tale coloring book than in the material of a psychiatric case record. The arabesques give to the houses a kind of rakish movement that might be seen as responding to some “off-to-work-we-go” song, like those of animated cartoons, while the bushes undulate to an echoing beat. The blue figure, outlined in arc-curved contours, seems levitated and floats along. These very

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\* The Washington Post, “Potomac,” April 15, 1973, p. 28.

† *A Dictionary of Art and Artists*, (Penguin Books, Baltimore, Md.), 1968, p. 174.

‡ Hereafter referred to as “Thatched Cottages.”

distortions, decorative in design and basic to van Gogh's art, however, have served only too often to reinforce the image of madness that the public has embraced.

Were there no legend to influence our thinking, these houses would be seen as directly descending from those found in Flemish primitives and seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, where we find parallel details of compartments, windows, shutters, and doorways, as well as similar color schemes. In "Thatched Cottages," the rectangular geometry has become curvilinear, and the handling, executed by a less-than-skillful draughtsman, coarse and blunt. The illustration is minimized so that the facts of everyday peasant life have become patterns and shapes whose appeal is more ornamental than factual.

The painting comes across as titillating to the senses, perhaps no more profound than "see red sing," "feel red-green oscillate," and "thus can pink-red-green play on the nerves." It is the vividness and brightness of the colors set in blatant contrast to each other that is so telling. All the give-away van Gogh color-reproductions that decorated living rooms of the late nineteen-thirties may have served to remind their owners of the legend of van Gogh that was being read and discussed so much at the time, but the direct effect was to enliven the rooms in which the reproductions hung and to brighten them in the way that billboards attract by their brightness and dominate by their boldness. The van Gogh picture advertises a bizarre no-place, neither Dutch-familiar nor oriental-exotic—a place somehow familiar, yet poster-strange.

Whether they had read the letters or not, the fauve painters saw the paintings as paintings and not as illustrations for the letters. Matisse, van Dongen, Derain, and the others were caught by the appeal of the van Gogh vision. It was his way of seeing that opened the way, particularly for Matisse, to investigate decoration, not only for the nature of its direct appeal, but for its ability to serve also as a vehicle capable of encompassing a range of meanings beyond the sensibilities of van Gogh.

In the canvases of St. Rémy and Auvers, *e.g.*, "Thatched Cottages," the patterns create an excitement that, to the



reader of the letters, is convincing evidence of "tormented sensibility." However, without the legend, the pervasive swirl would be seen as growing out of the traditions. Since the swirl that dominates in "Thatched Cottages" stems perhaps most directly from Rubens, occurs in much of French eighteenth-century painting, can be seen in Delacroix, pervades Tintoretto's work, and is commonplace in impressionism, it can hardly serve as an indication of madness in one painter and fail to give rise to a charge of derangement against the others.

We have already seen the existence of patterned brush work in "Nude" and in "Postman." Here, in "Thatched Cottages," it has become a more superficial, all-over patterning. Van Gogh's use of the swirl is more uniform and more mechanical than Rubens' all-out "let go" designs (note the careful stitchery used to designate smoke); of the two, the Rubens' swirl is usually the more insistent.

The brush work in "Thatched Cottages" recalls Gauguin's work, wherein planes of intense color are also patterned with brush strokes—uniform patches of verticals derived from Cézanne. Although the strokes in the van Gogh are more varied in shape and direction than the systematic hatchings of Gauguin, the purpose served is the same: to enliven broad areas and thus to make them more entertaining to the eye.

The patterns in "Thatched Cottages" add decoration to decoration: thick commas of pigment, raised like a heavy nap, turn the pink sky frizzy; and shutters become blue blobs on the canvas' surface. Vincent is again modeling with his paint. Indeed, the heavy pigment has become whipped-cream thick—a frosting of embossed houses and vegetation in bas-relief, worked out in an ever-heavier impasto.

Unlike Dutch street scenes, usually set parallel to the picture plane, the one in "Thatched Cottages" is placed diagonally, angled across the canvas; figure and sun then sandwich houses between them to form a stable "X" composition in space. The painting is unified by its pervasive patterns, the bright color and thick paint throughout, together with the rhythmic use of the arabesque.

One can share the swirling excitement of putting it all

down and feel the upward radiation suggestive of the sun and glare that precipitated this canvas. If the sun is too obviously a circle, or if one of the reds hits hard and jumps out from the other colors, it is the result of work quickly done and left with no time allowed for reflection and adjustment of tone. But the madness, sought by the viewer conditioned by Vincent's writings, is not in the painting. There is no loss of control. The painting is not disjointed or in any way incoherent and is consistent with the canvases of Paris and Arles out of which it grew.

Vincent van Gogh's work continues to become increasingly animated, though heavy-handed. It continues to be ever more decorative, expanding in a direction away from the essential nature of things. Yet it remains rooted in both the world and in the traditions of painting. Carried forward from his Low Country past is the Dutch interest in intimate scenes from everyday life, specifically the peasant, the cottages, and the expanse of sky. In the white-yellow-blue combination is to be found the trace of a Vermeer color scheme, as the red-green combination recalls the German-Flemish. The raised surfaces and certain illustrative details of the subject are reminiscent of Flemish panels; so is the small scale.\* French, generally, is the colorfulness of the color; the brilliance of the flood of light and the juxtaposition of the strokes are impressionist. Pissarro is recalled in the heaviness of the pigment, Cézanne in the organization of the brush strokes, Seurat in the emphasis on pattern and shape, Japanese prints in the exotic color combinations and generally decorative appeal. Brought along from Arles is his own personal kind of decoration. New are the ubiquitous arabesques and patterned areas, borrowed from Gauguin and made personal, which now transform all into a unique entity.

Vincent van Gogh's importance lies in what he invented: decorative illustration of appealing color and striking pattern, directly effective and easily imitated. But the individual paintings lack the range and depth that result from a constant growth in every area that mark a fully developing,

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\* The canvas measures  $20\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $16\frac{7}{8}$  inches.



many-faceted artist, such as a Renoir or a Titian or a Rembrandt. Three-dimensional solidity, insight into character, plastic illustration, textures—these are among the values abandoned or ignored in his total surrender to decoration. Had he grown in those areas to the degree that he developed in that of decoration, his stature as an artist would have been colossal indeed, rather than that of the innovative but relatively limited painter that he was.\*

On the other hand, suppose only the letters and none of the paintings had survived? Those letters which invariably include thanks for the last money received and culminate in an appeal: “send me more, send it soon, I faint, I starve;” as well as reports on the writer’s blood, teeth, stomach; his need for clothes, materials, frames; accounts of how hard he was working, how much he was suffering; his drinking played down, his venereal disease not mentioned—all of this designed to soften Theo and to make him less of a “financier.”

Without the pictures, how would such letters have been understood? The author would have been thought of as literate and intelligent when discussing his reading or the paintings he had seen, articulate and lucid when reporting on the conditions at the Academy at Antwerp or the asylum at St. Rémy. (He really did not fit in, nor did he belong, in either place.) His image would have been the one he wanted his brother to accept: that of someone hard-working and capable of self-sacrifice toward an ideal, nobly enduring deprivation while aspiring to become an artist—perhaps protesting his fate a little too much. The comments about his own paintings, unseen and unknown to the reader, would

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\* The “Postman” is an everyday Dutch subject freed of that tradition’s black and copper color. But, on the other hand, it does not have the Dutch insight into character (*e.g.*, Rembrandt’s), nor the bravura technique (*e.g.*, Hals’); neither does it have the textures or illustrative skill of lesser Dutch masters (*e.g.*, Ter Borch or Brouwer). Where modeling is expected and called for, we do not find it: the cap’s visor remains flat, the whole bust is two-dimensional rather than three. Nor are the textures of flesh, cloth, or buttons to be found. They are not there: gold remains yellow pigment, and cloth is pigment, as are flesh and beard. And, although the “Postman” would not necessarily have been a “better” painting for their inclusion, even in the excitement aroused by the novelty of it all, one regrets the unrealized promise of the fullness of expression dealt with in the “Nude.”

evoke images poetic and deeply moving: "I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green"—a literary idea not carried out in plastic terms.\*

On a psychiatric level, Vincent's letters can be seen as evidence of his total acceptance of his dependency: what he read and what he had seen and what he was doing had to be put into words, penned, and mailed to his brother; the connection with Theo must never be allowed to weaken. Indeed, Vincent died with an unmailed letter in his pocket.

Vincent's bizarre actions can be seen as resulting from his terrible anxiety, aroused whenever it seemed likely that his situation in relation to his brother might be threatened. Perhaps it was in order to prove that he had to be taken care of that he was unwilling to ration the support money supplied him and that he was careless of his body: someone as uncontrolled as he, in his drinking and smoking as well as in his work habits, needed a brother's devotion. Perhaps he placed himself in confinement at St. Rémy more to dramatize this need to be looked after than to undergo a course of treatment. We know that he left there, as he had come, of his own volition. (Although his illness was not then, and was never to be, diagnosed, he was discharged as "cured.")

When he had an opportunity to exhibit or to sell, van Gogh did not jump at the chance. He was not ready. Nor was he ready to be critically well-received. He preferred things to remain as they were. Perhaps he worked hard at his painting only to justify the dependency he so flagrantly perpetuated. One can, in fact, speculate that he painted not only to compensate for his inadequacies in the practical world, but also to legitimize his claim to Theo's care and supervision. When Theo's marriage and fatherhood appeared to be about to change things, Vincent not only reacted in inappropriate ways, with tantrums, as it were, but also became less productive.

Theo's role in all this was dictated by his own psycho-

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\* "The Night Café" (Plate 60), done at Arles in September 1888, is the painting referred to. The intensity and drama of this picture, expressed in contrasting colors and obvious brush strokes, is undeniable. But can effects of contrasting colors and obvious brush strokes be equated with "the terrible passions of humanity"?



logical requirements, part of which was to be needed, just as part of Vincent's was to be needy. Theo drew strength from the responsibilities that he assumed: they stiffened him. Without "the burden" of Vincent, he was to collapse. While the Theo of legend is seen as the support, the real Theo, "pale, blond, and so melancholy that he seemed to hold canvases the way beggars hold their wooden bowls," was in constant indecision concerning the course he himself should follow. A hundred times he debated leaving the firm that employed him to establish himself on his own. Vincent, in his letters to Theo, often felt he had to play the older and wiser brother—offering advice on how to eat, telling Theo how to manage his business affairs—as though he were the supportive one, necessarily managing Theo's life, and not the one being given the helping hand. And, then, Theo's contributions to Vincent's work—criticism, introductions to artists, exhibitions—represented a creative role in the art world, in contrast to the parasitic one of a mere dealer. That this answered a real need in himself is shown by the fact that his wife and child, the outsiders who were to undermine the relationship between the two men, were not worth living for once his brother the painter had died.

But the letters do exist and so do the paintings, and each represents a unique achievement. Although the letters grew out of Vincent's need for support, they reflect his interest in writing as the pictures reflect his interest in, and his use of, the traditions of painting. The paintings may have resulted from his need to rationalize his extreme dependency, but they cannot be taken as evidence of illness; rather, in their creativity and development, they represent life and health. They provide the viewer with the opportunity to share Vincent's strength and vitality in much the way that Theo must have drawn upon them. The correspondence, his bread-and-butter letters, as it were, was intended to evoke a more tender response.\*

---

\* The existence of both letters and paintings provides two different aspects of the same personality. A parallel can be drawn between Vincent's letters and those that Mozart wrote to his family. Does one get to the meaning of Mozart's music, let alone the sound of it, from the reading of his correspondence?

The climax to the story is that the paintings turned out to be art. Rough and crude and heavy-handed, they have the appeal of primitive painting, recalling the work done by untrained country people, when, as a change from the labor of the farm, they turn to painting and crafts. Like theirs, Vincent's work is unschooled in many ways and has the character of handwork, as we have seen. He shows us the world transformed by his personal use of color and pattern, expressive of movement and excitement, and, moreover, pervaded by a truly naïve personality, evinced by his use of his medium, that is endearing and universally irresistible. It is this unique and all-encompassing naïveté that shows in everything he does and shapes everything that he has learned. It gives conviction and credibility to his painting and, by association, lends credence to his correspondence.

Had no change in the relationship of the two brothers come about, it is probable that Vincent would have continued to read and write and would have continued busily turning out canvases ever more patterned, perhaps more vivid and encrusted. In the light of their unhappy experience when together, that he would have remained far from Theo and Paris seems also certain. And Theo would have continued to function in the art-business world, sustained by his very real part in Vincent's creativity.

But Theo moved toward marriage, and Vincent mutilated himself.

Theo's wife became pregnant, and Vincent signed himself into the asylum.

And then the baby was born. . . .

Vincent realized that the game was over. Theo had now a wife and child and, moreover, was uncertain about his employment: that he might have to withdraw some of his support in favor of his own family was a threatening possibility. Perhaps even more unsettling were the beginnings of his—Vincent's—own recognition by the public. The timing was right to assume some responsibility for himself and to begin to go it alone. He chose to die. Like a fantasy suicide that everyone on occasion has permitted himself, he allowed



himself the enjoyment of observing the effect on others, before he actually expired, of the shot that took his life.

And, climax on climax, when Vincent died, it was actually Theo who lost his power to reason. He developed delusions of grandeur. He resigned his job precipitously. He became violent. He attacked his wife and child. He had to be locked up. After some weeks of deep apathy, he too died, within six months of his brother.

Then it was that the paintings, born of this *folie à deux*, came into a life of their own to help satisfy the human need for color and pattern; and the letters, written to cement the enmeshment of the two brothers, emerged to become literature. But legend took over and reduced pictures and correspondence to the level of popular fiction—a melodrama that conforms to what everyone expects an artist to be, with illustrations supplied by the author.





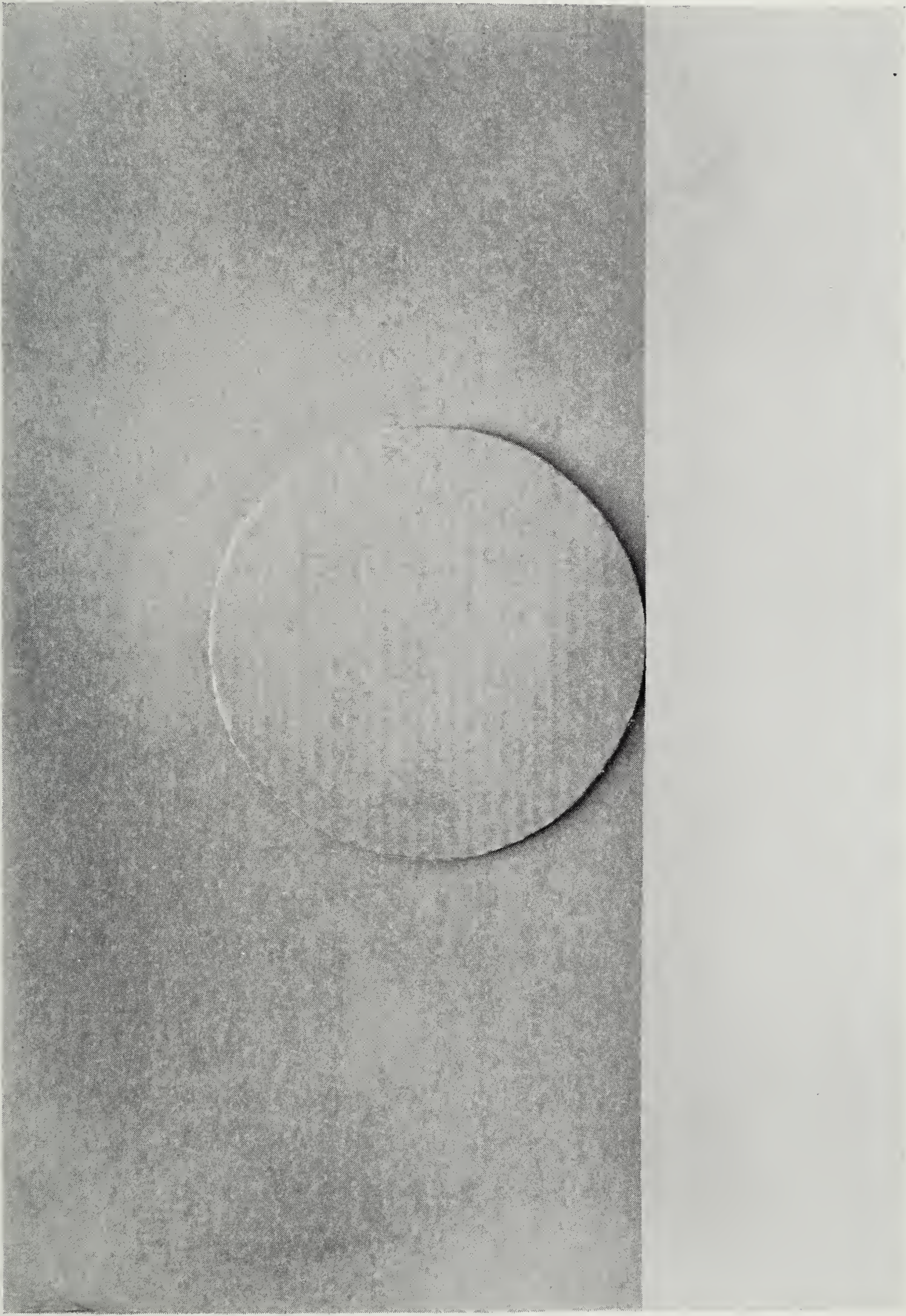
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*Unless otherwise stated, the originals reproduced in the following plates belong to the collection of The Barnes Foundation.*

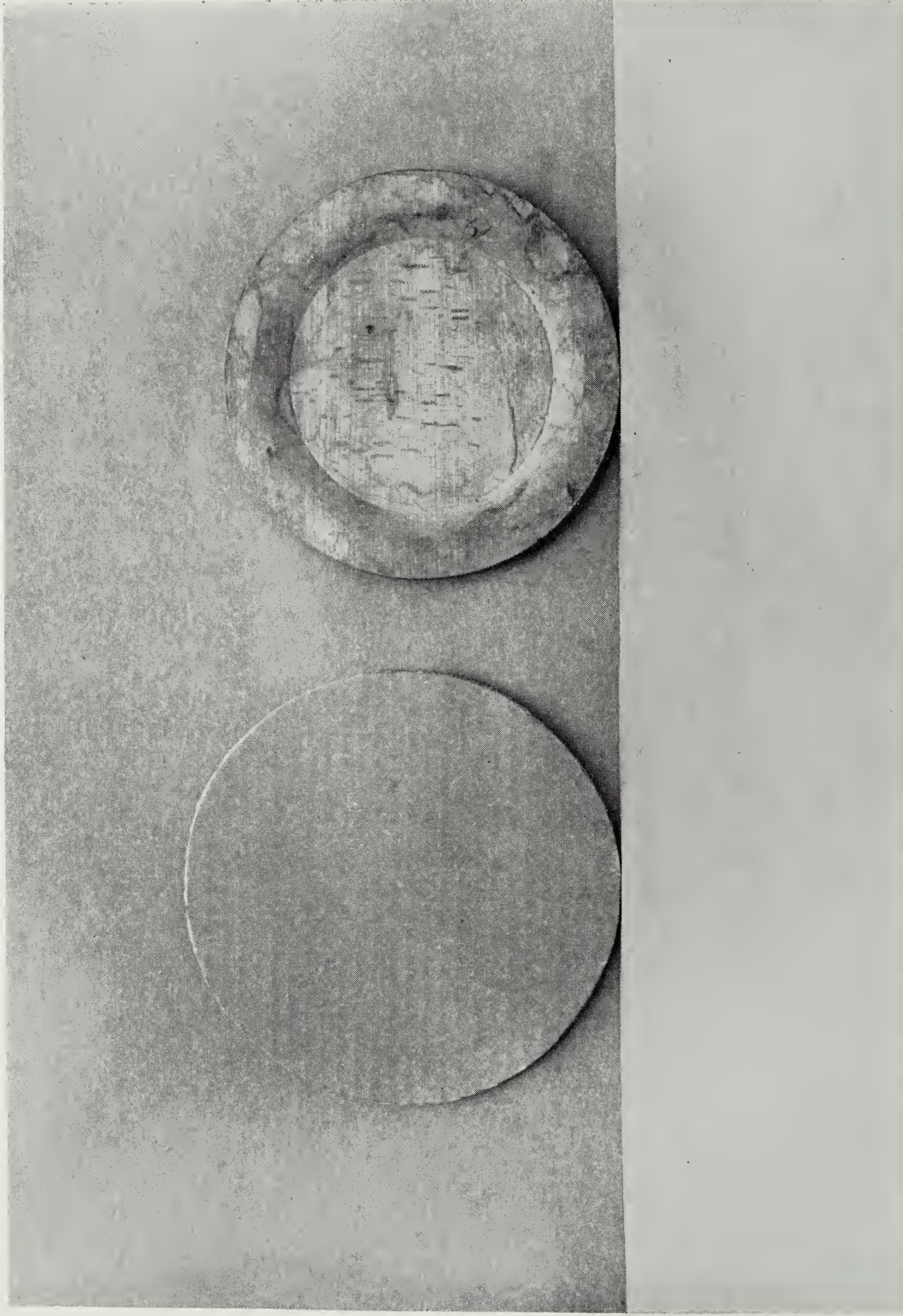
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Left to right: Cardboard Disc; Trencher.



PLATE 3



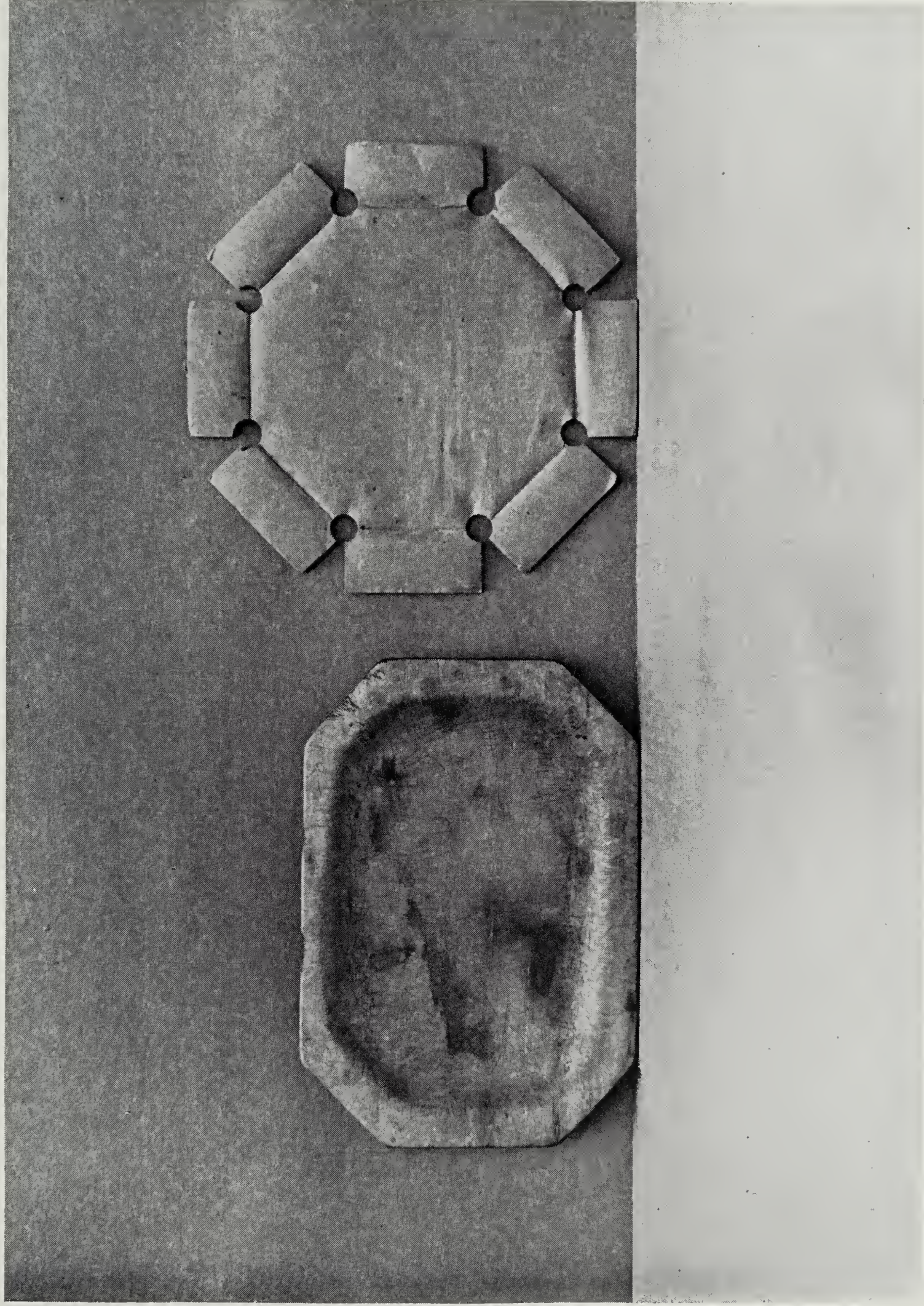
Left to right: Cardboard Disc; Light Trencher; Dark Trencher.

(Private Collection)









Left to right: Trencher Platter; Cut-out Cardboard.

(Private Collection)





Left to right: Dark Trencher; Pewter Plate.

(Private Collection)

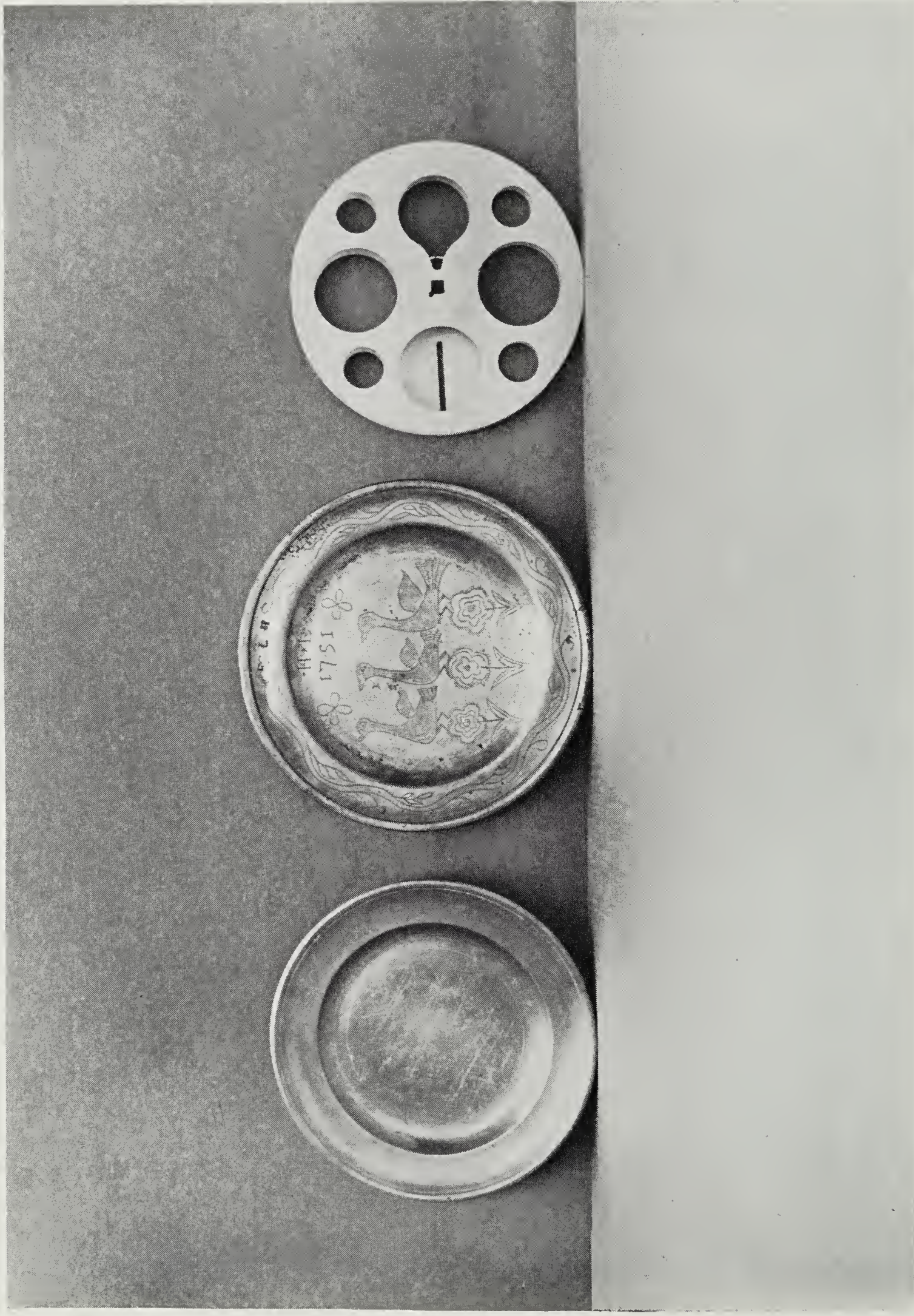


PLATE 7



Left to right: Pewter Plate; Engraved Pewter Plate.  
(Private Collection)





Left to right: Pewter Plate; Engraved Pewter Plate; Movie Reel.





Left to right: Engraved Pewter Plate; Wedgwood "Cashmere" Saucer.

(Private Collection)



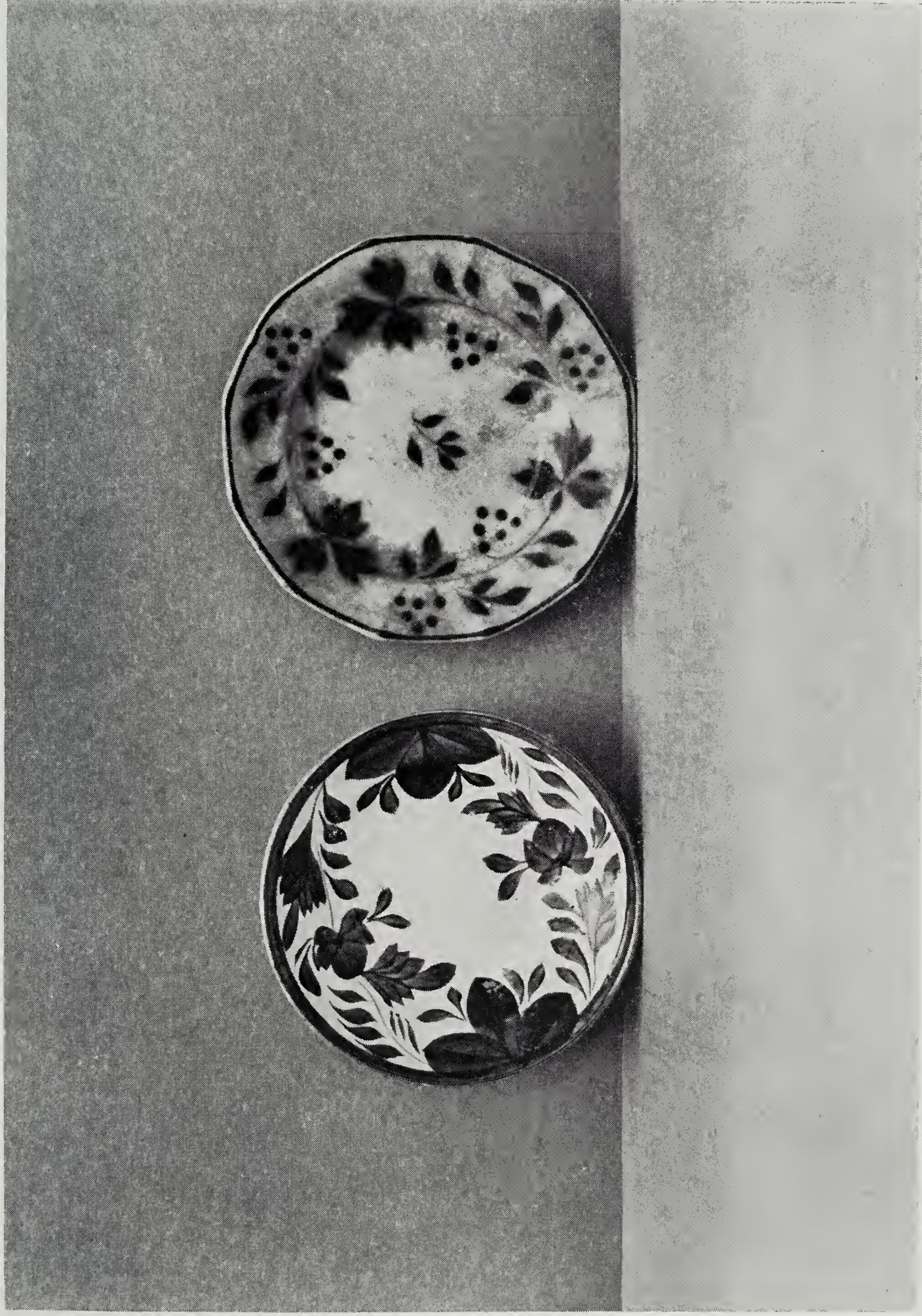
PLATE 10



Left to right: Wedgwood "Cashmere" Saucer; Staffordshire Saucer.

(Private Collection)





Left to right: Staffordshire Saucer; Staffordshire Plate.

(Private Collection)



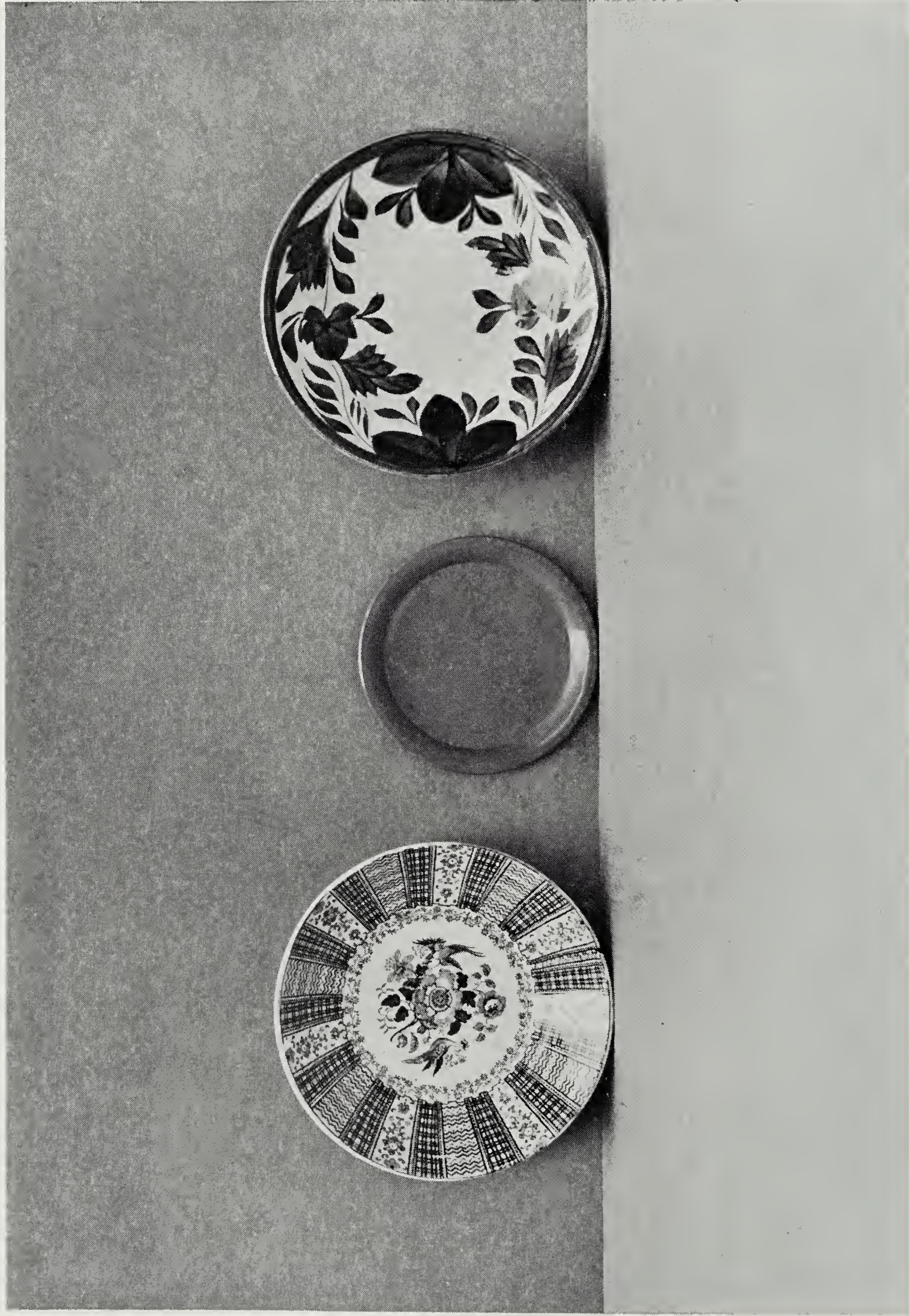


Left to right: Staffordshire Saucer; Dutch Plate.









Left to right: Wedgwood "Cashmere" Saucer; Coaster; Staffordshire Saucer.





Left to right:

Wedgwood "Cashmere" Saucer; Coaster; Staffordshire Saucer; Canister Lid.

(Private Collection)





Left to right: Solid-color Plate; "Spatterware" Plate.

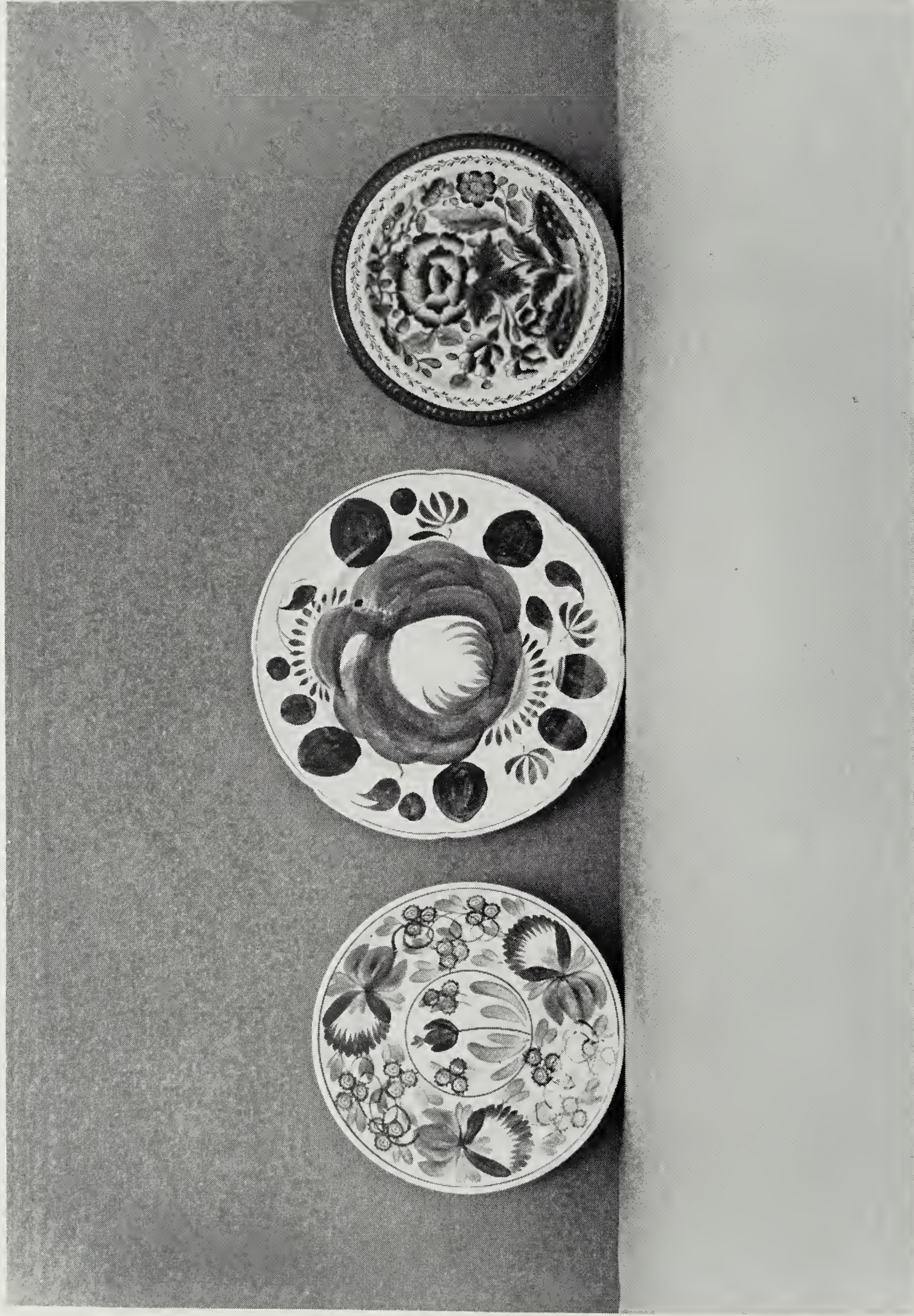




Left to right: "Spatterware" Plate; "Spatterware" Plate with Dots.

(Private Collection)

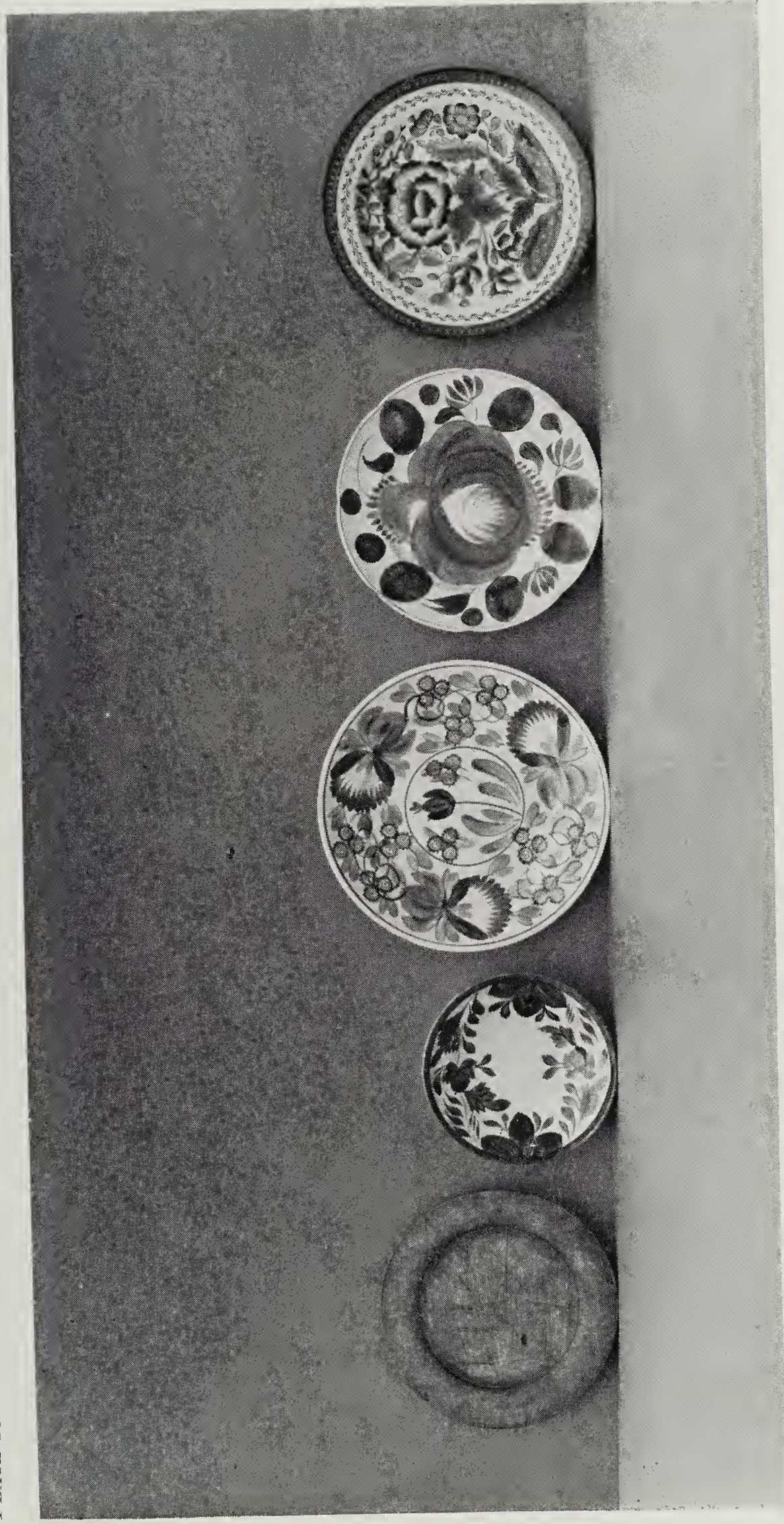




Left to right: Dutch Plate; "Cabbage Rose" Plate; "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation'" Plate.

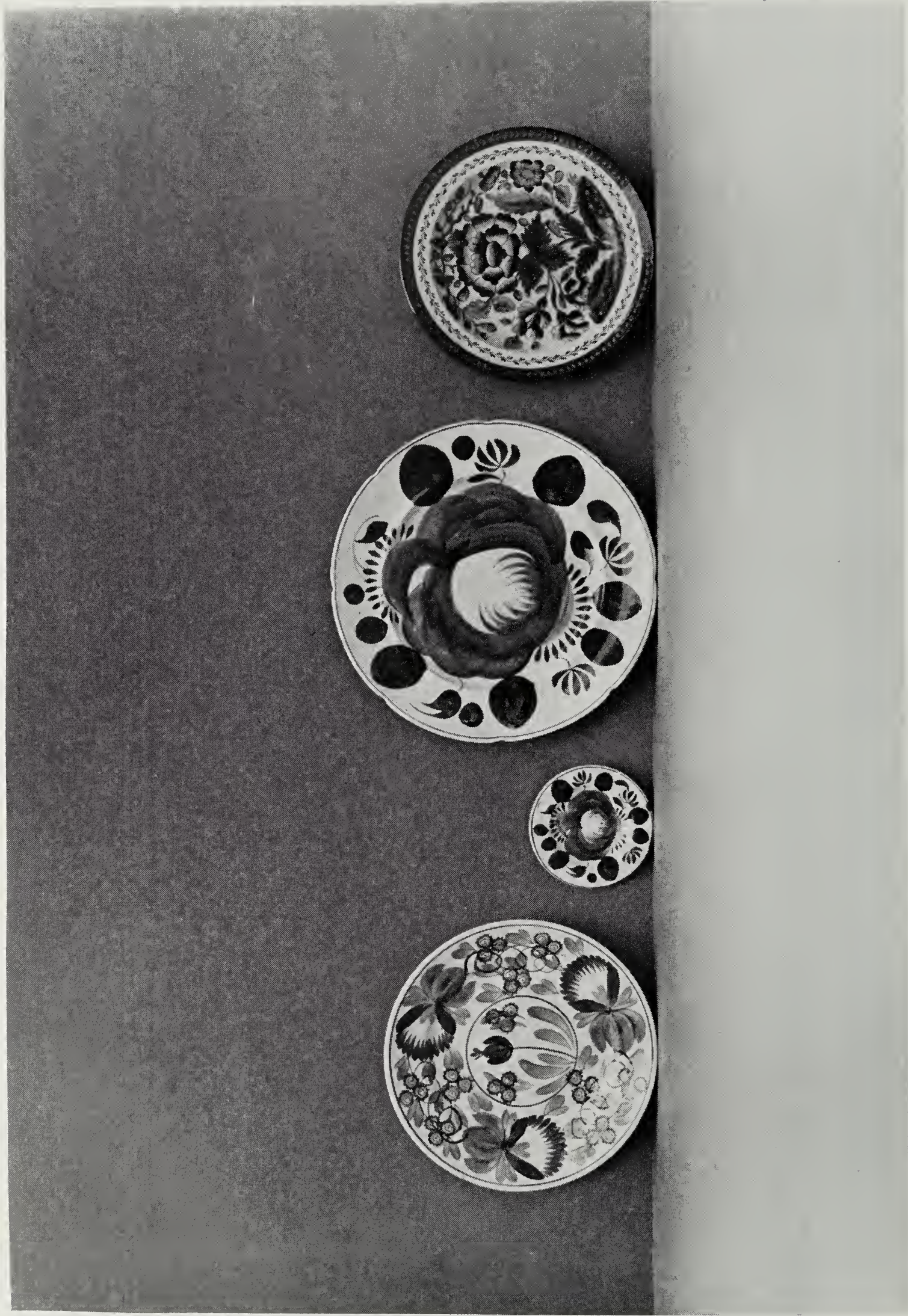
(Private Collection)





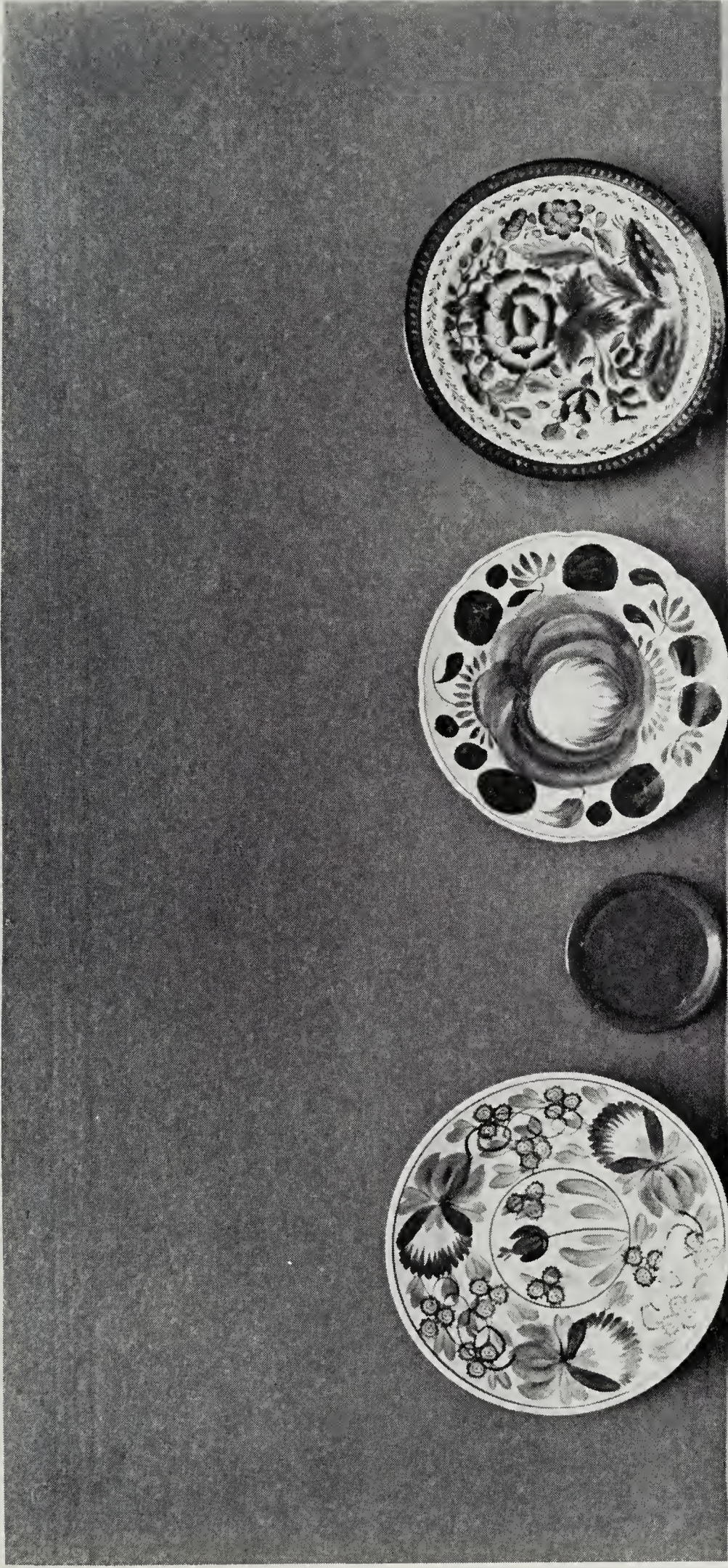
Left to right: Trencher; Staffordshire Saucer; Dutch Plate; "Cabbage Rose" Plate; "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation'" Plate.  
(Private Collection)





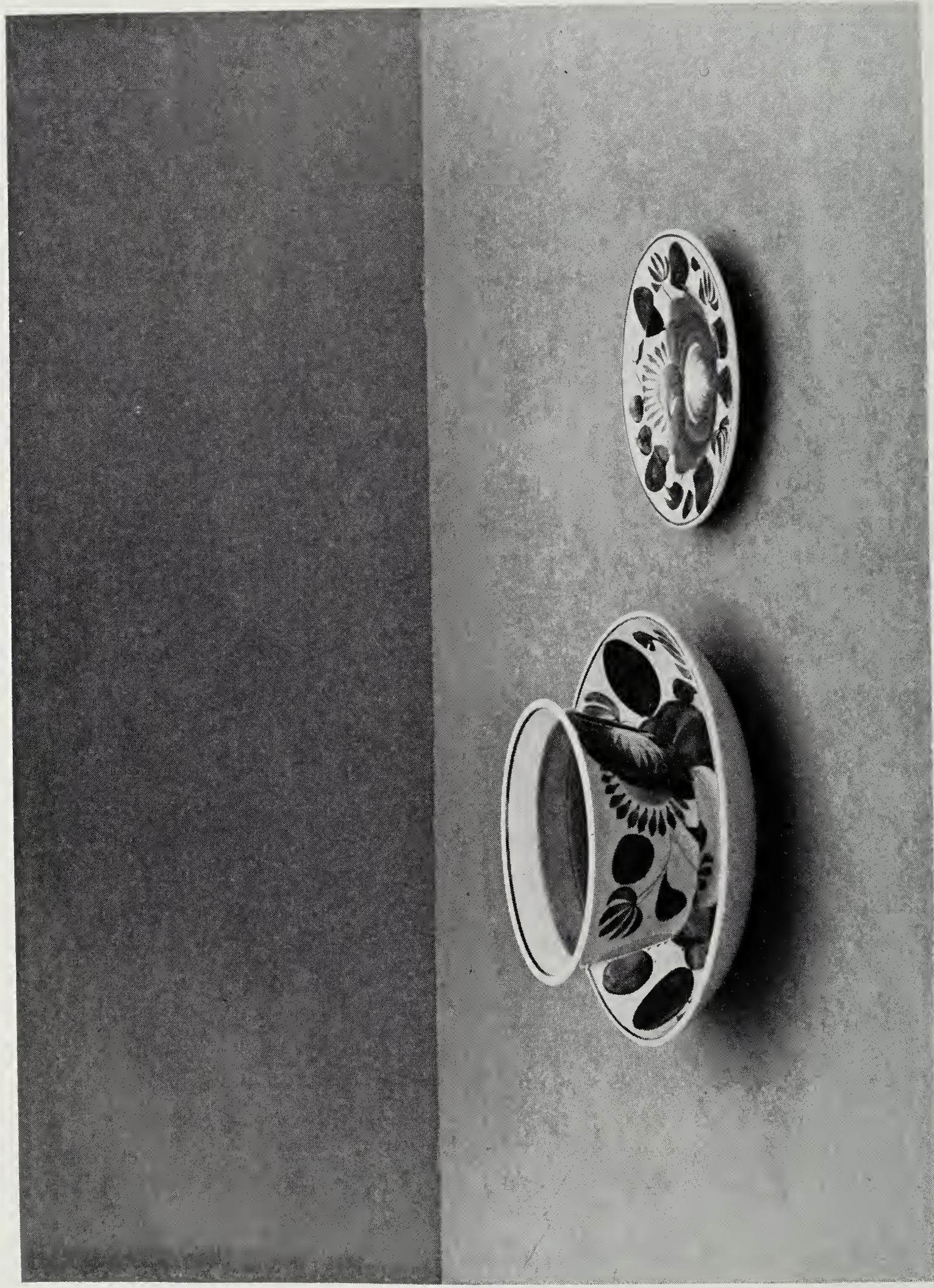
Left to right: Dutch Plate; "Cabbage Rose" Cup Plate; "Cabbage Rose" Dinner Plate; "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation'" Plate.  
(Private Collection)





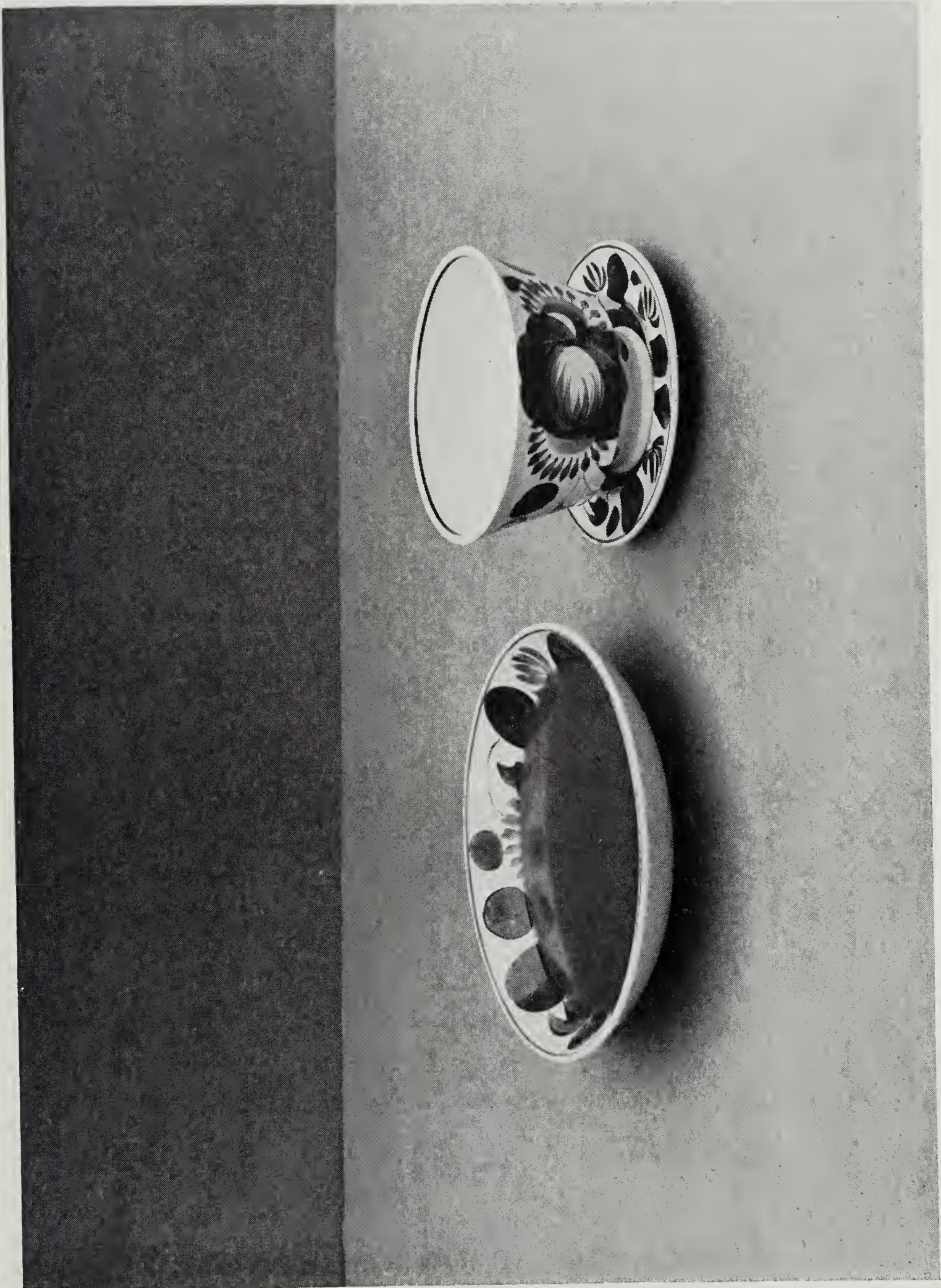
Left to right: Dutch Plate; Coaster; "Cabbage Rose" Plate; "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation'" Plate. (Private Collection)





“Cabbage Rose” Cup on Saucer with Cup Plate.





“Cabbage Rose” Saucer with Cup on Cup Plate.

(Private Collection)

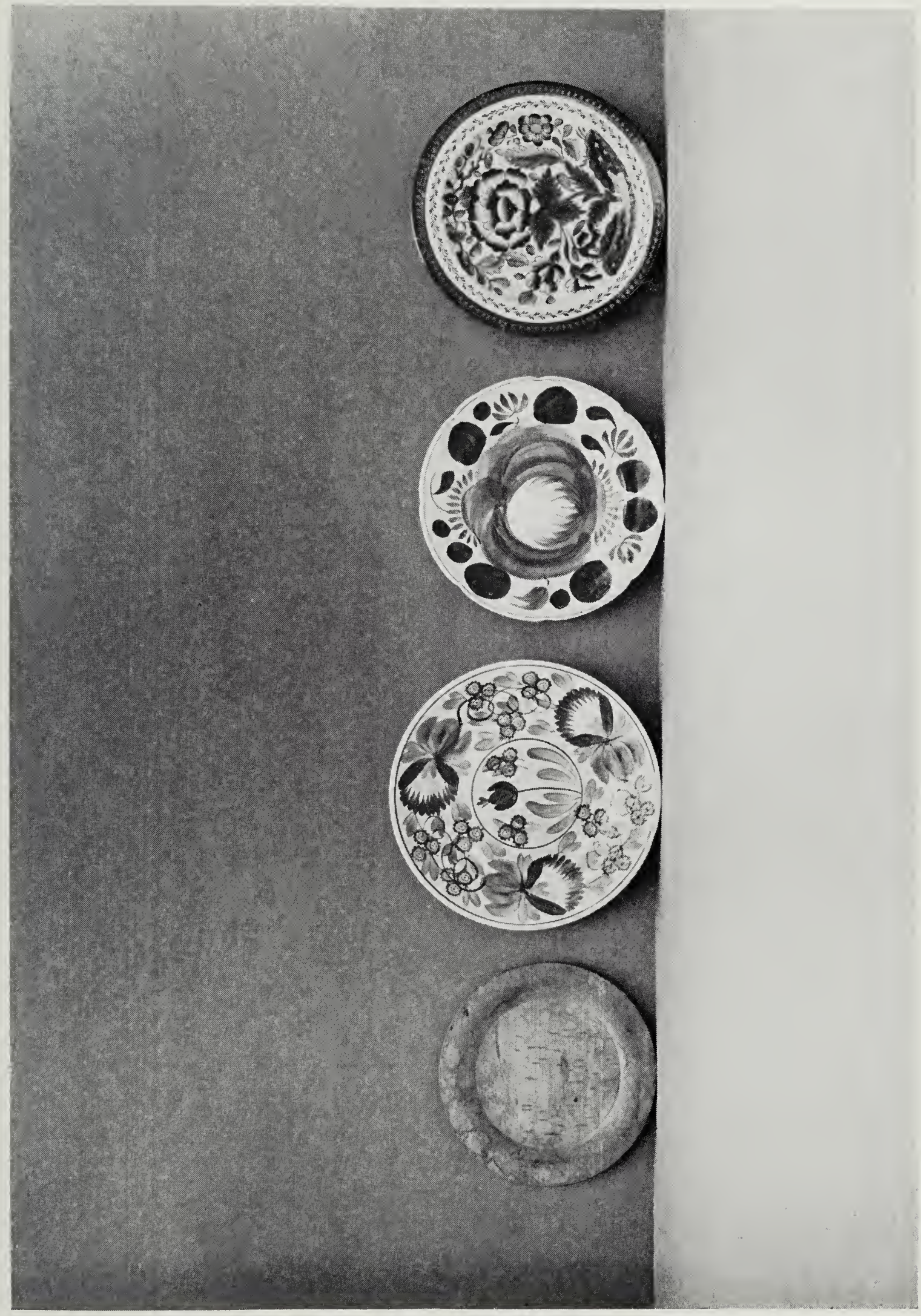




Left to right: "Gaudy Dutch 'Dove'" Plate; "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation'" Plate.

(Private Collection)





Left to right: Trencher; Dutch Plate; "Cabbage Rose" Plate; "Gaudy Dutch 'Carnation'" Plate. (Private Collection)









Pine-wood Box









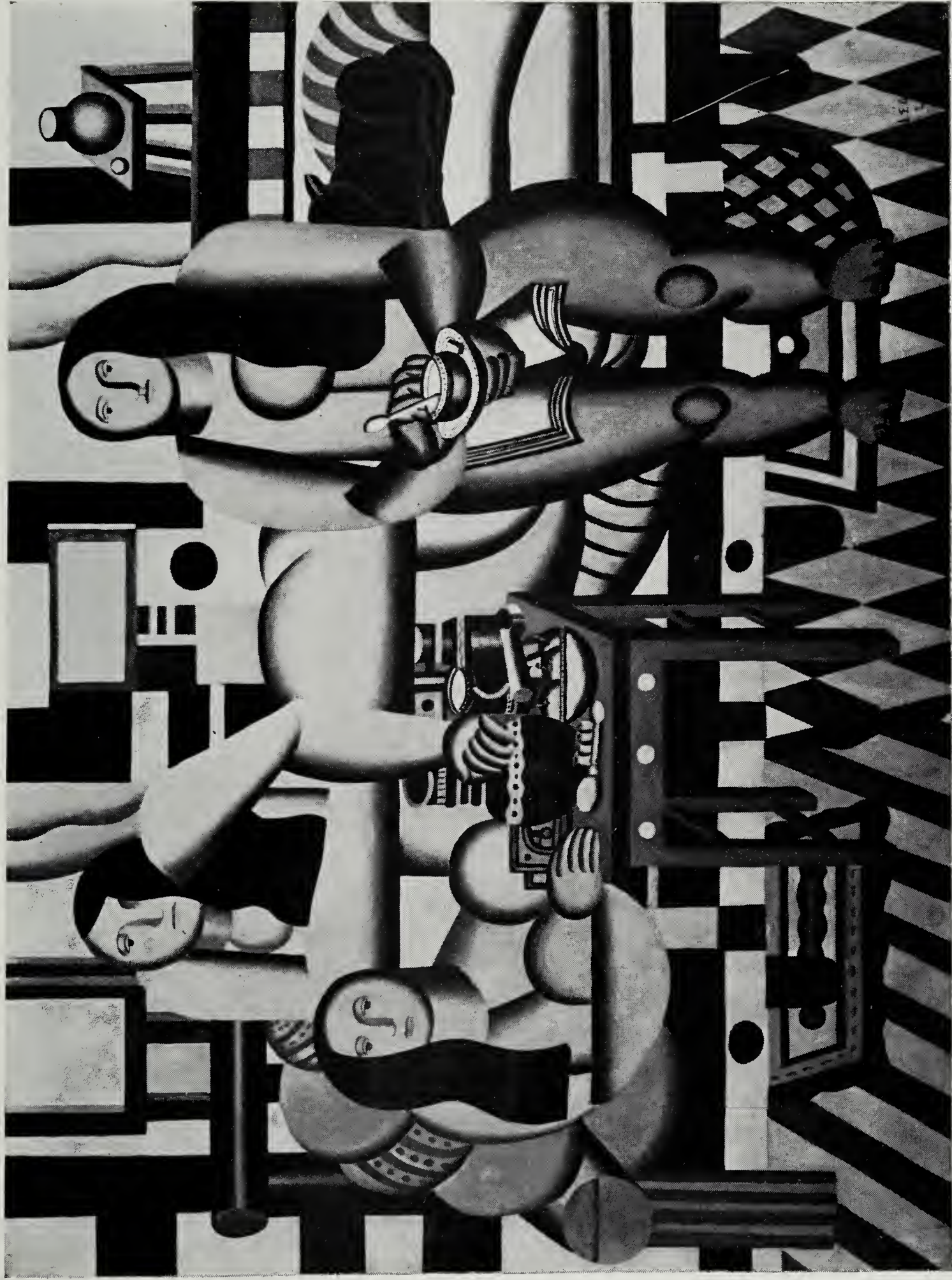
Renoir

*Bathing Group*





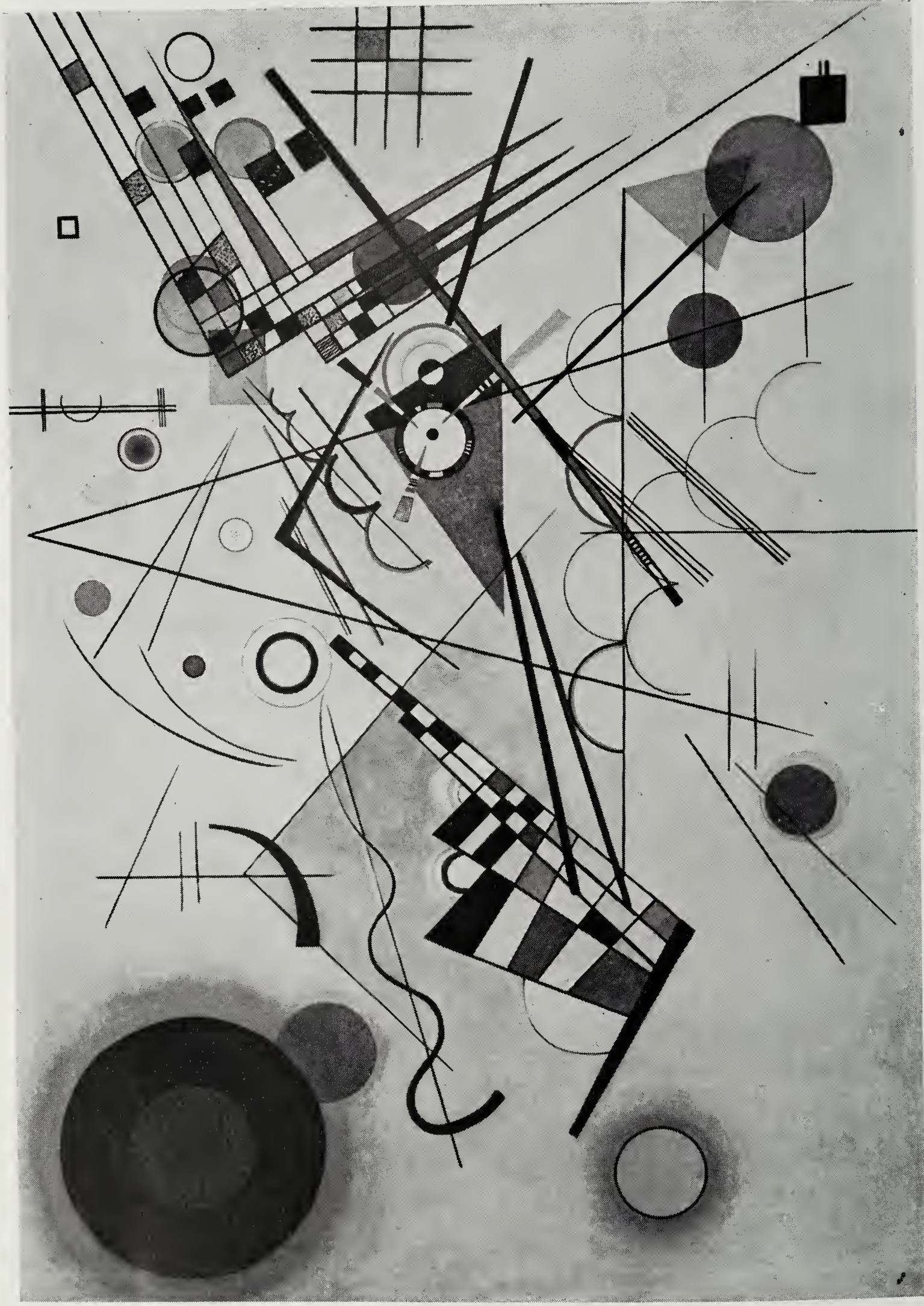




*Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner 1921)*  
 (Oil on Canvas, 72 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  $\times$  99"—Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York—  
 Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund)

Léger









Vieira da Silva

*Domestic Symphony*



PLATE 34



Jackson Pollock

*Summertime*  
(Collection Lee Krasner Pollock  
—Courtesy Marlborough Art Gallery)



PLATE 35



Detail from *Summertime* (Plate 34)

Jackson Pollock









Eugène Carrière

*Mother and Child*  
(Courtesy of the John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia)









Orozco

*Zapatisas.* 1931  
(Oil on Canvas, 45" × 55")  
(Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York—Given anonymously)



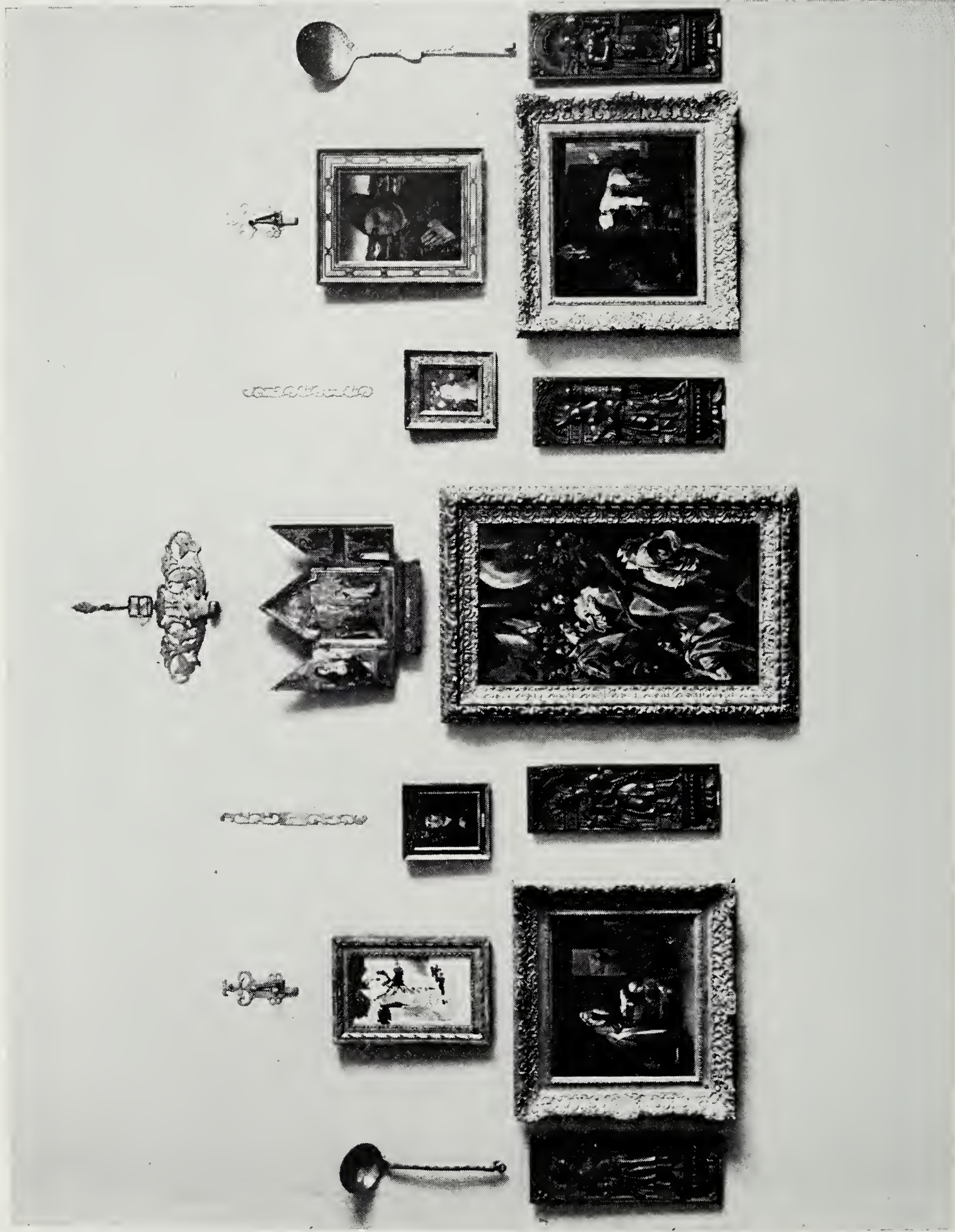






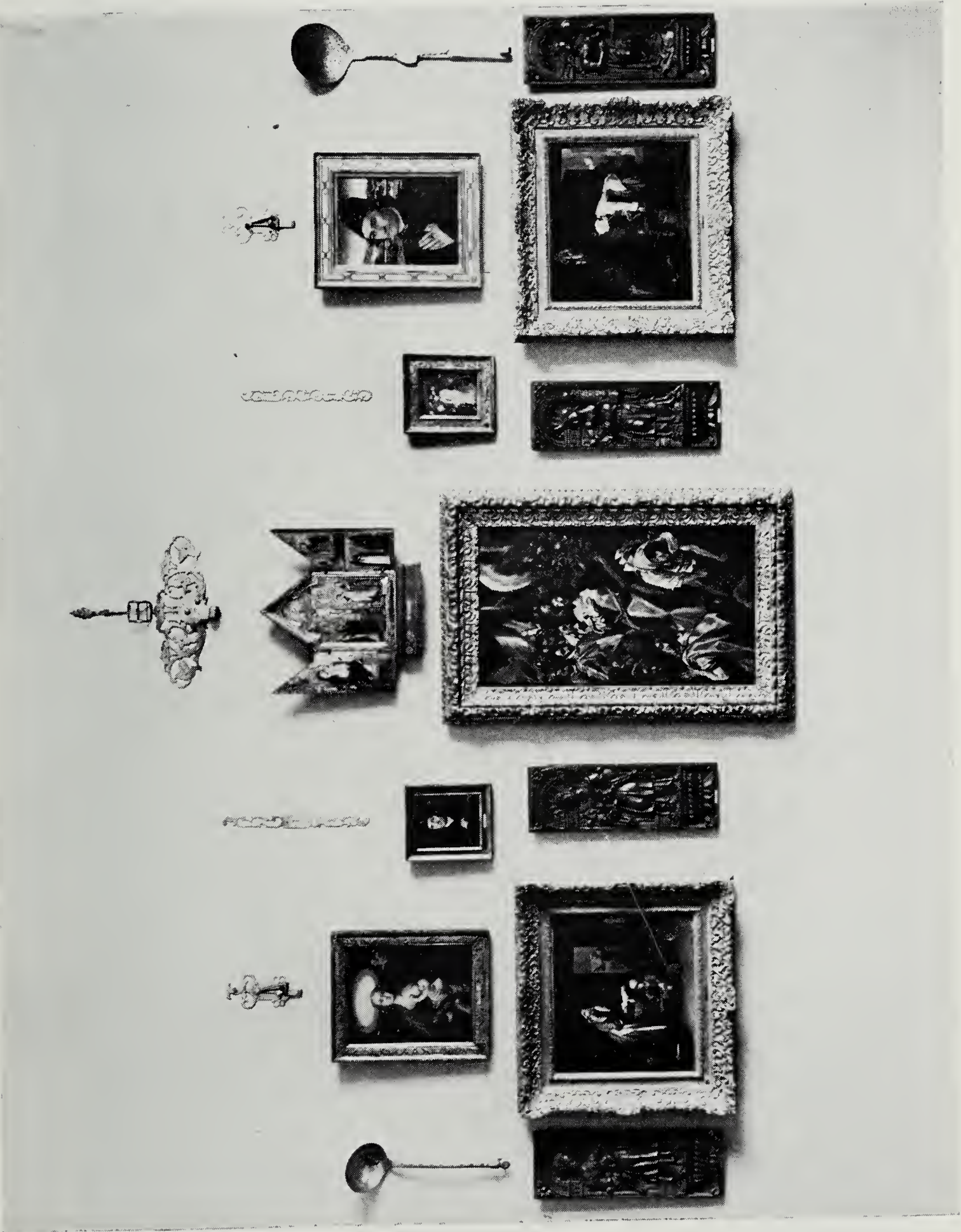
*Winter Sleep*  
(Lithograph—From *Verve Magazine*, Paris, Vol. I, No. 3)





Wall of Old Masters at The Barnes Foundation with Matisse's *Standing Figure* Replacing Baldung's *Madonna and Child* at Upper Left





Wall of Old Masters at The Barnes Foundation









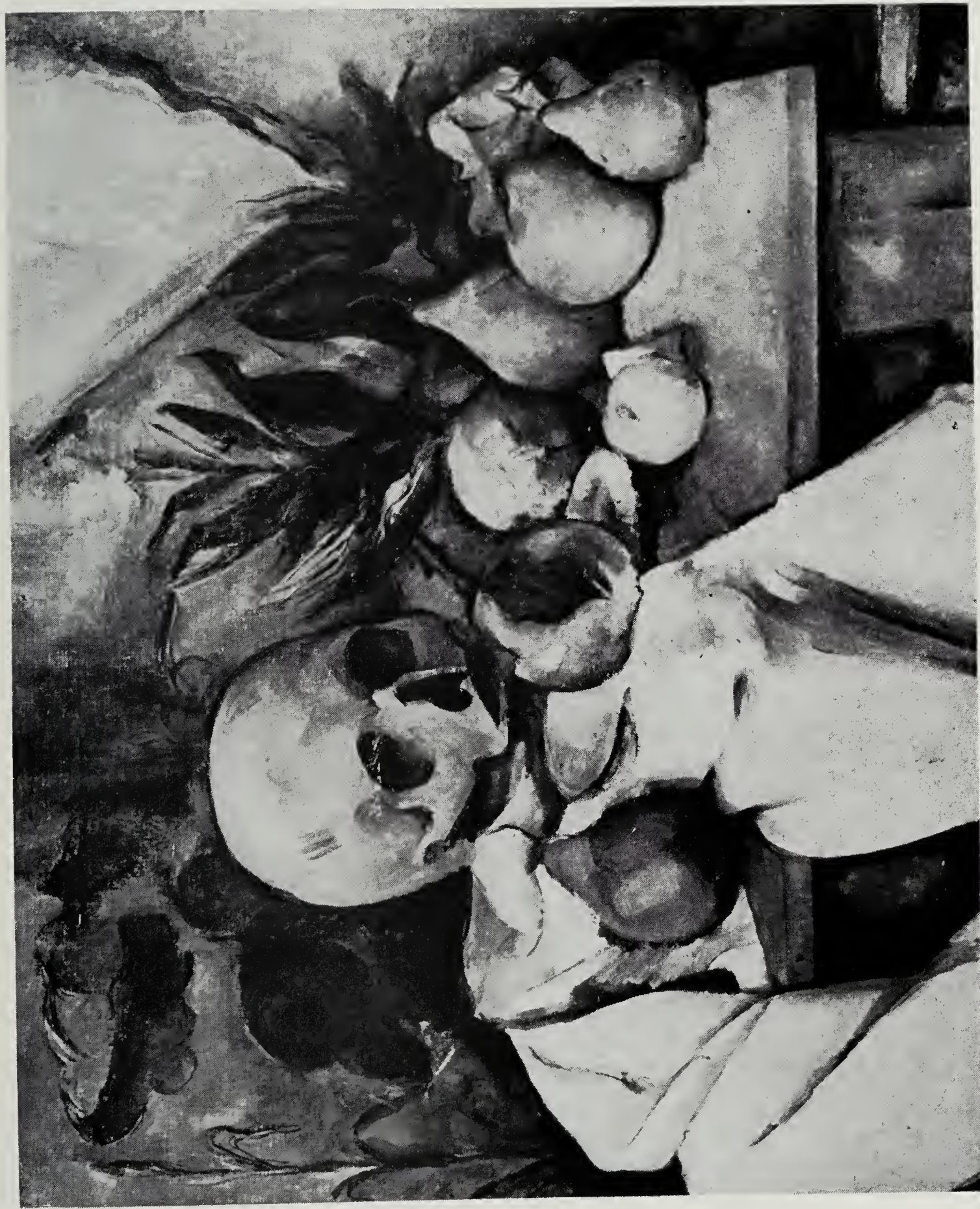
*Pomegranates*

Renoir









*Skull and Fruit*

Cézanne

























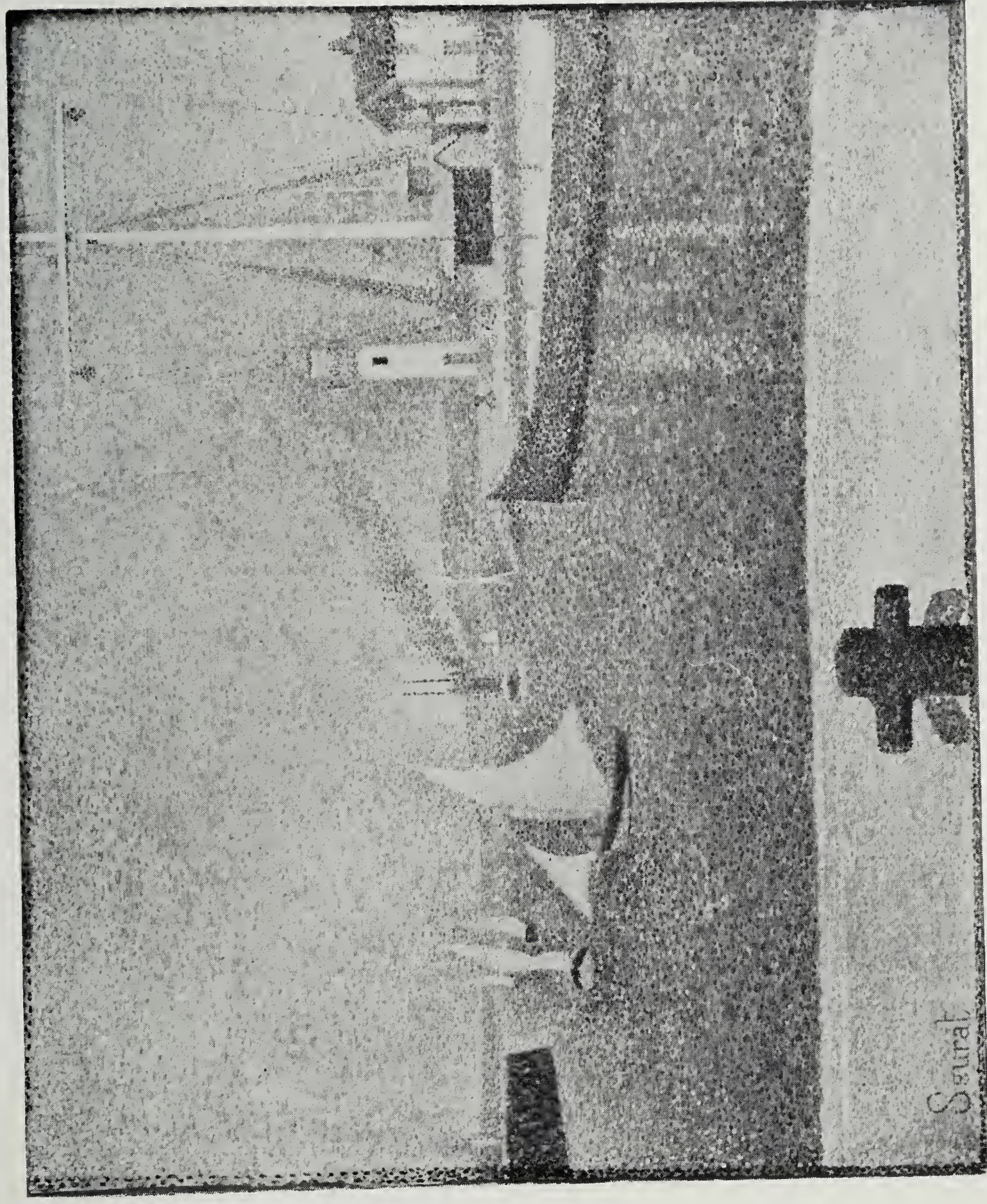




Susan Cray (New Jersey, 1843)

*Country Scene*  
(Cut-out Silhouette)











FOLD-OUT





Dürer

Detail from *St. Jerome* (Plate 90)









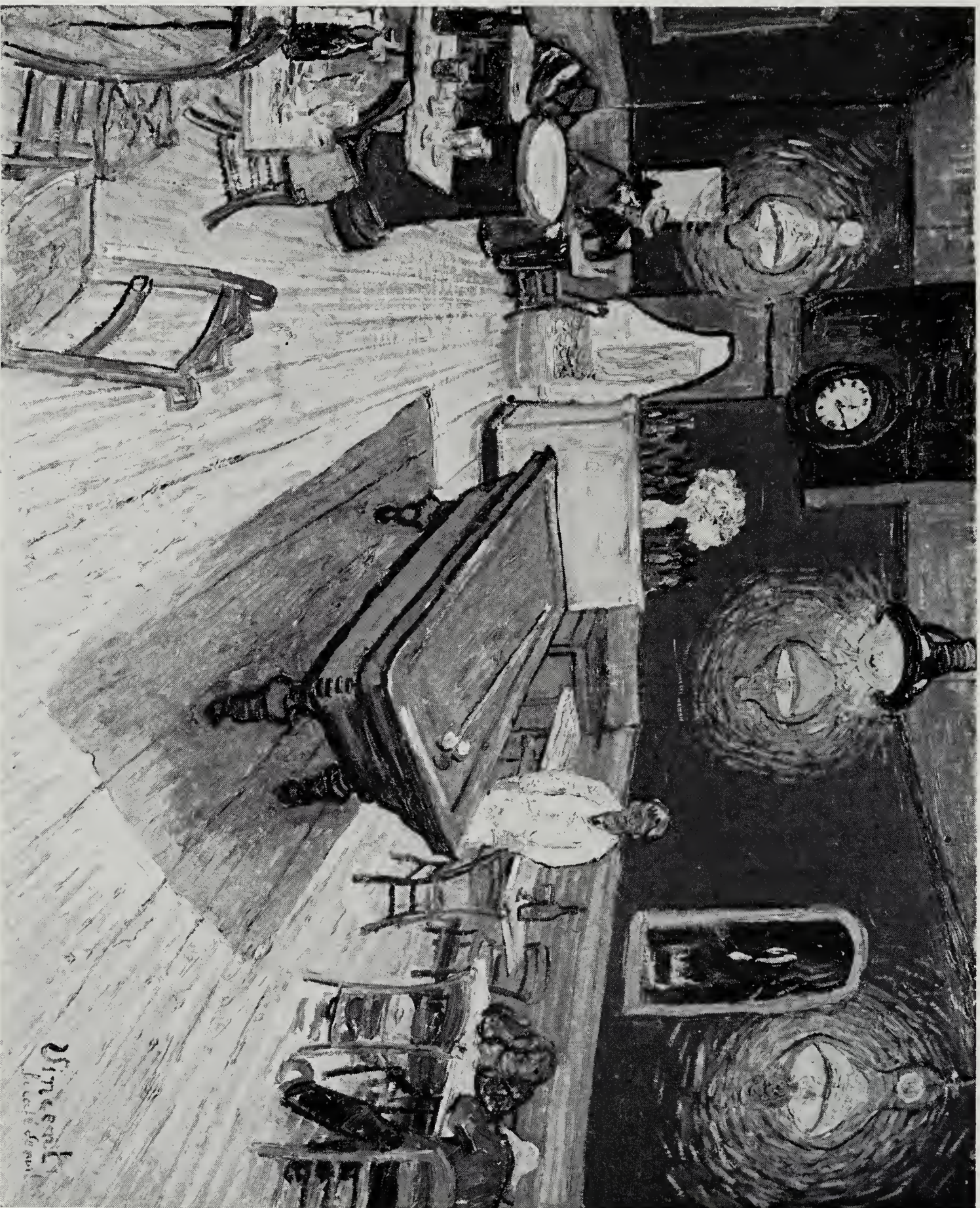




Van Gogh

*The Potato Eaters*  
(Rijksmuseum—Vincent van Gogh Stichting, Amsterdam)





Van Gogh

*The Night Café*  
(Yale University Art Gallery  
—Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903)



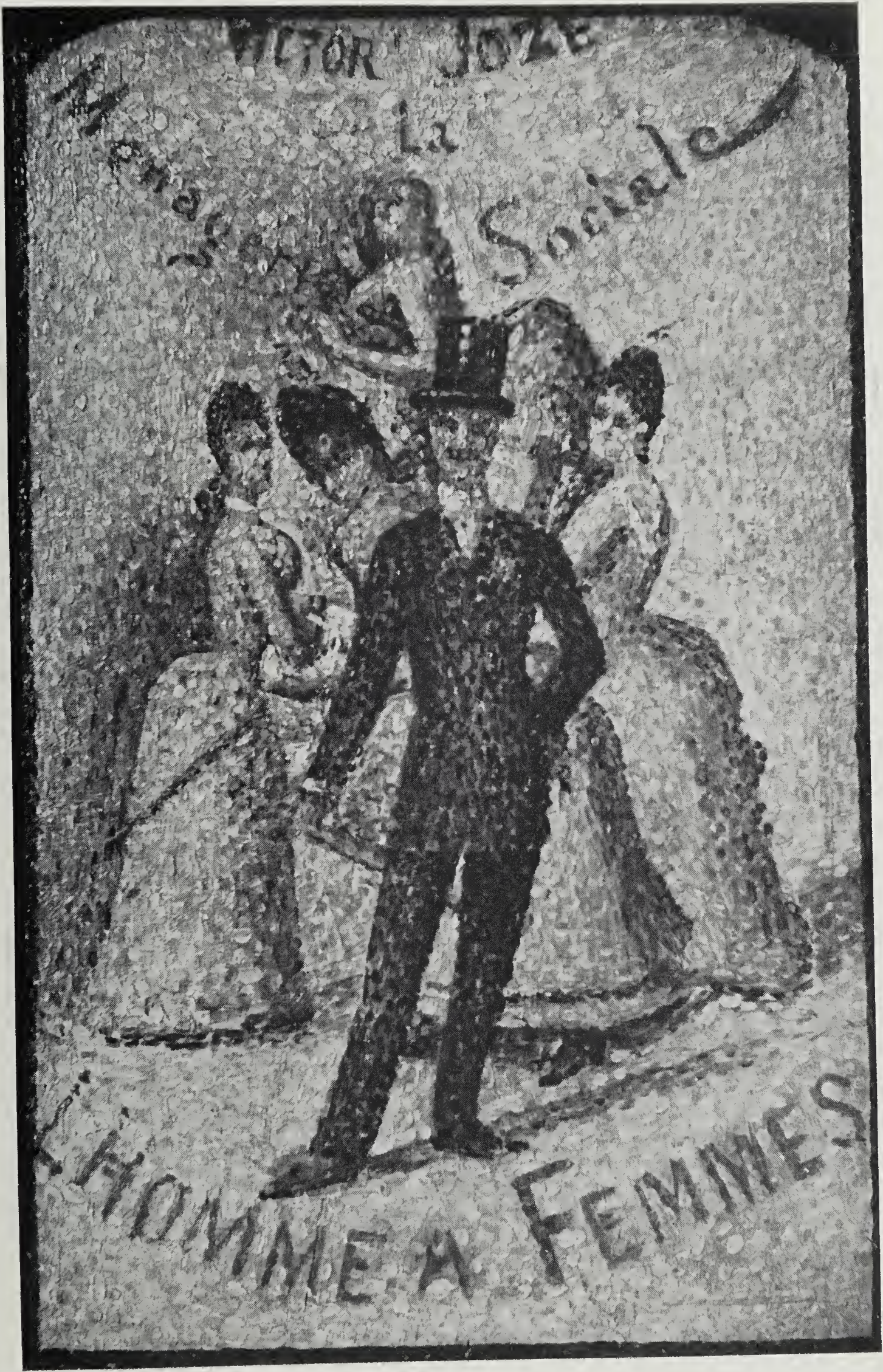
PLATE 61



Corot

*Madame Lemaistre*





Seurat

*The Ladies' Man*



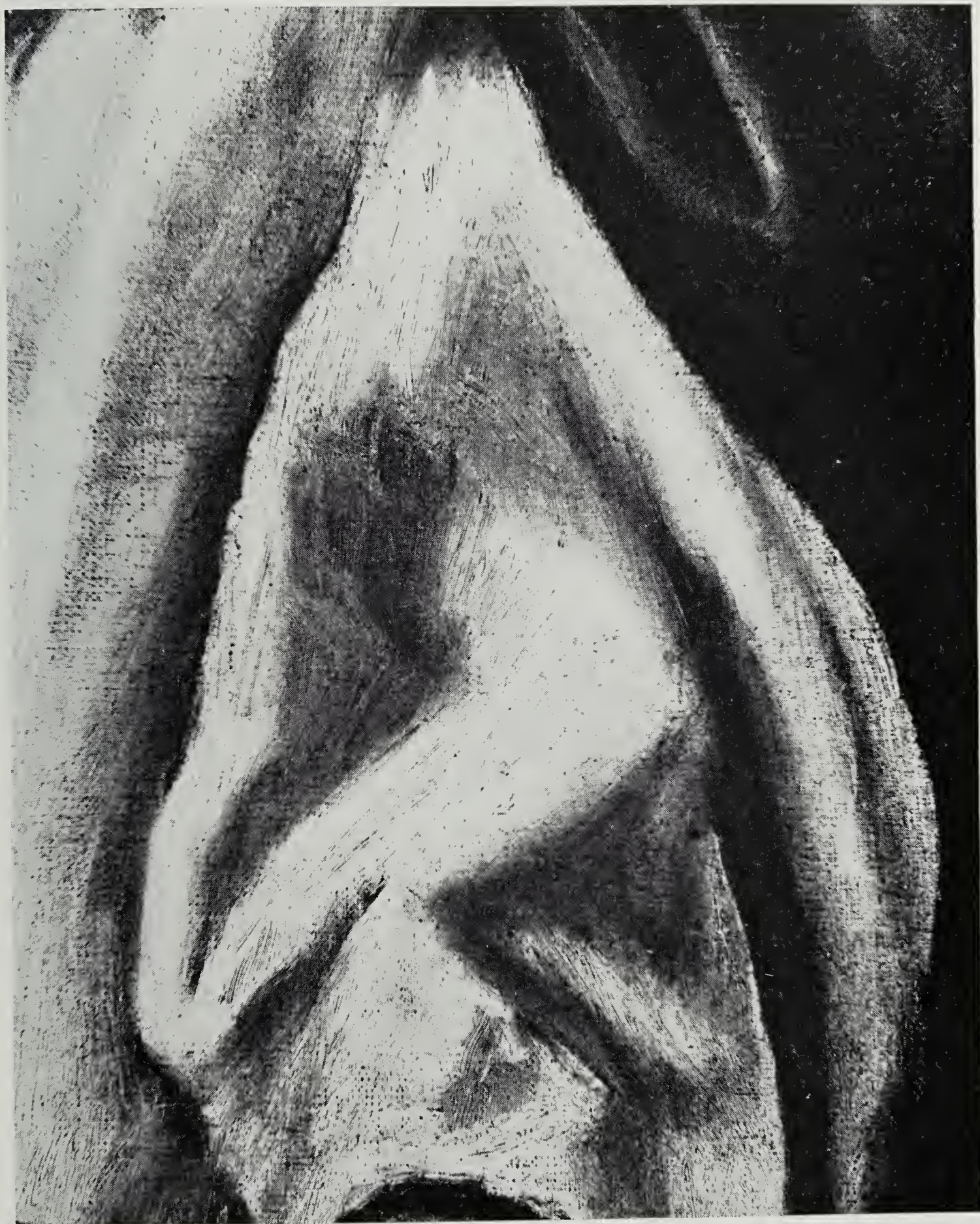
PLATE 63



Cézanne

Detail from *Skull and Fruit* (Plate 47)

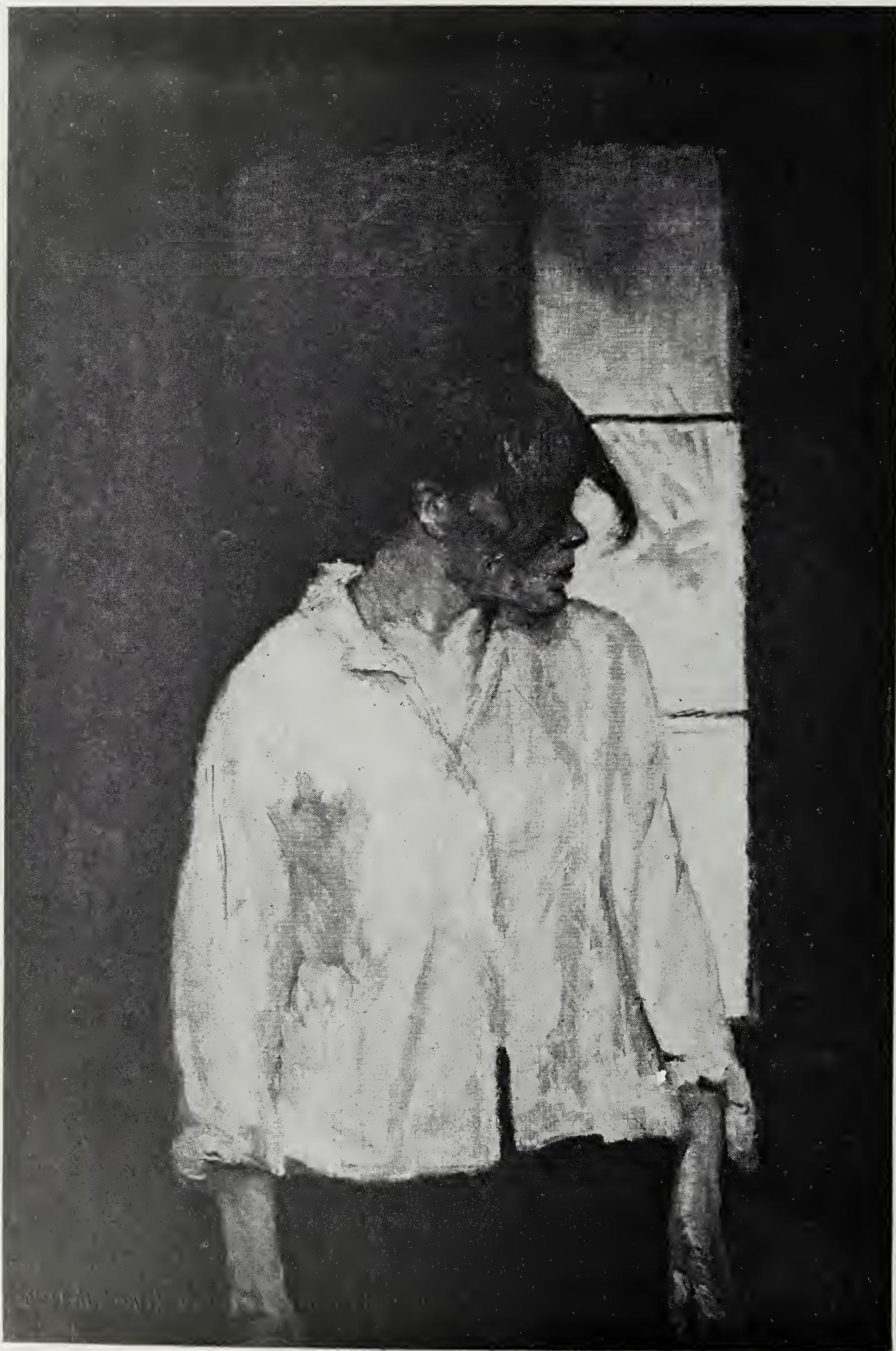




El Greco

Detail from *Vision of St. Hyacinth* (Plate 76)

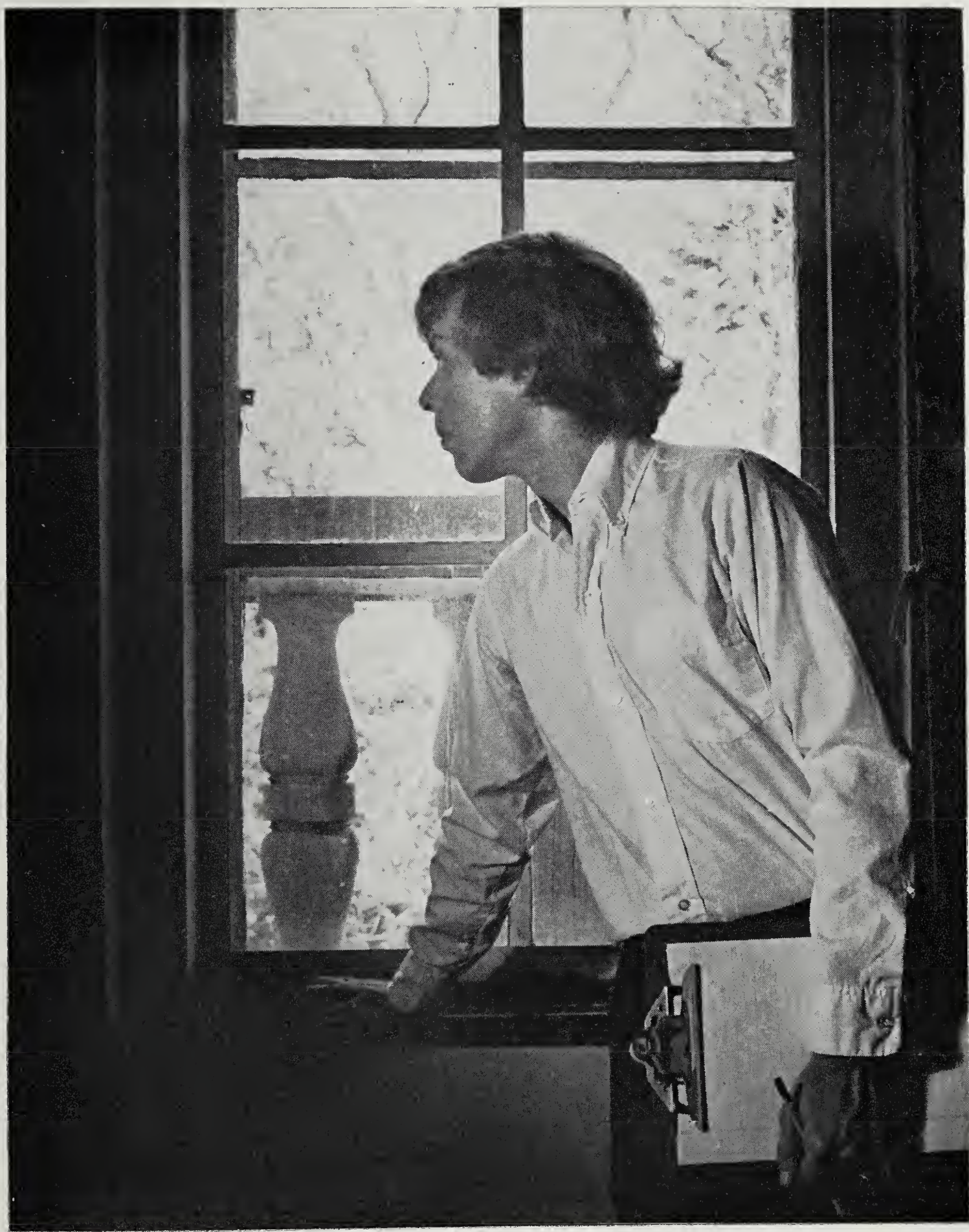




Toulouse-Lautrec

*The Laundress*





Angelo Pinto

*I. Nicolas King*  
(Photograph)



... it's always  
a pleasure  
to drink . . . to serve

*since 1872*

EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE PARIS  
NEW ORLEANS EXPOSITION 1884  
ST. LOUIS EXPOSITION 1904  
CHICAGO WORLD'S FAIR 1893

**BOTTLED IN BOND**  
**I.W. HARPER**  
**KENTUCKY**  
**STRAIGHT BOURBON**  
**WHISKEY**  
DISTILLED AND BOTTLED BY  
I.W. HARPER DISTILLING COMPANY  
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

THE *Prized* **BOTTLED IN BOND**  
**KENTUCKY STRAIGHT** *Bourbon*

KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY, BOTTLED IN BOND, 100 PROOF, I. W. HARPER DISTILLING COMPANY, LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Photograph  
(© 1974 I. W. Harper Distilling Company  
Louisville, Kentucky)





Folding Chair, Modern



PLATE 69



Windsor Chair, Connecticut, Nineteenth Century





Painted Arrow-back Chair, American, Nineteenth Century

(Private Collection)





Leonardo da Vinci

*St. John the Baptist*  
(Louvre—Photograph Musées Nationaux, Paris)





Kisling

*Torso*

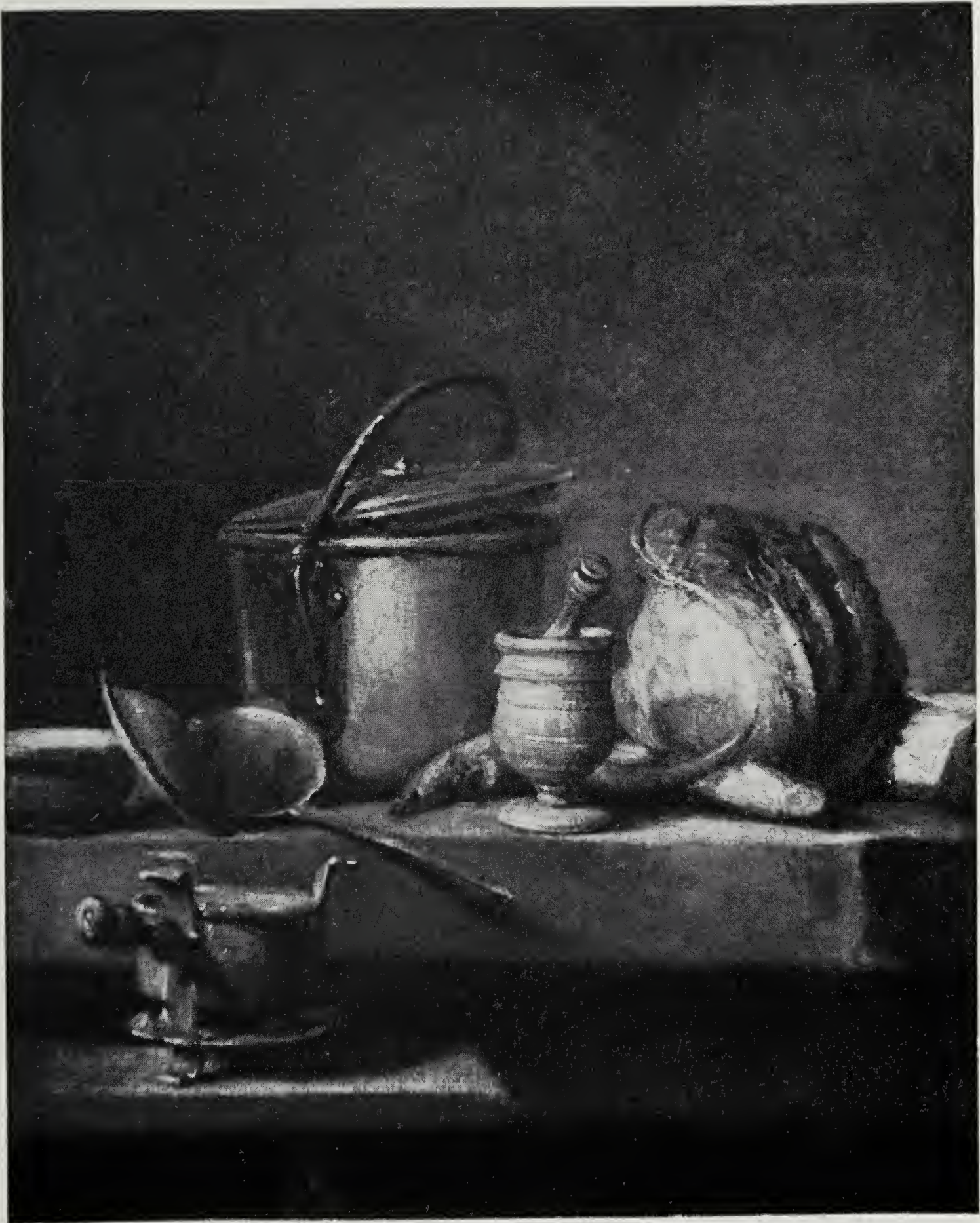




Rembrandt

*Self-Portrait*  
(The Frick Collection, New York  
—Copyrighted by The Frick Collection)





Chardin

*Still Life with Cabbage*

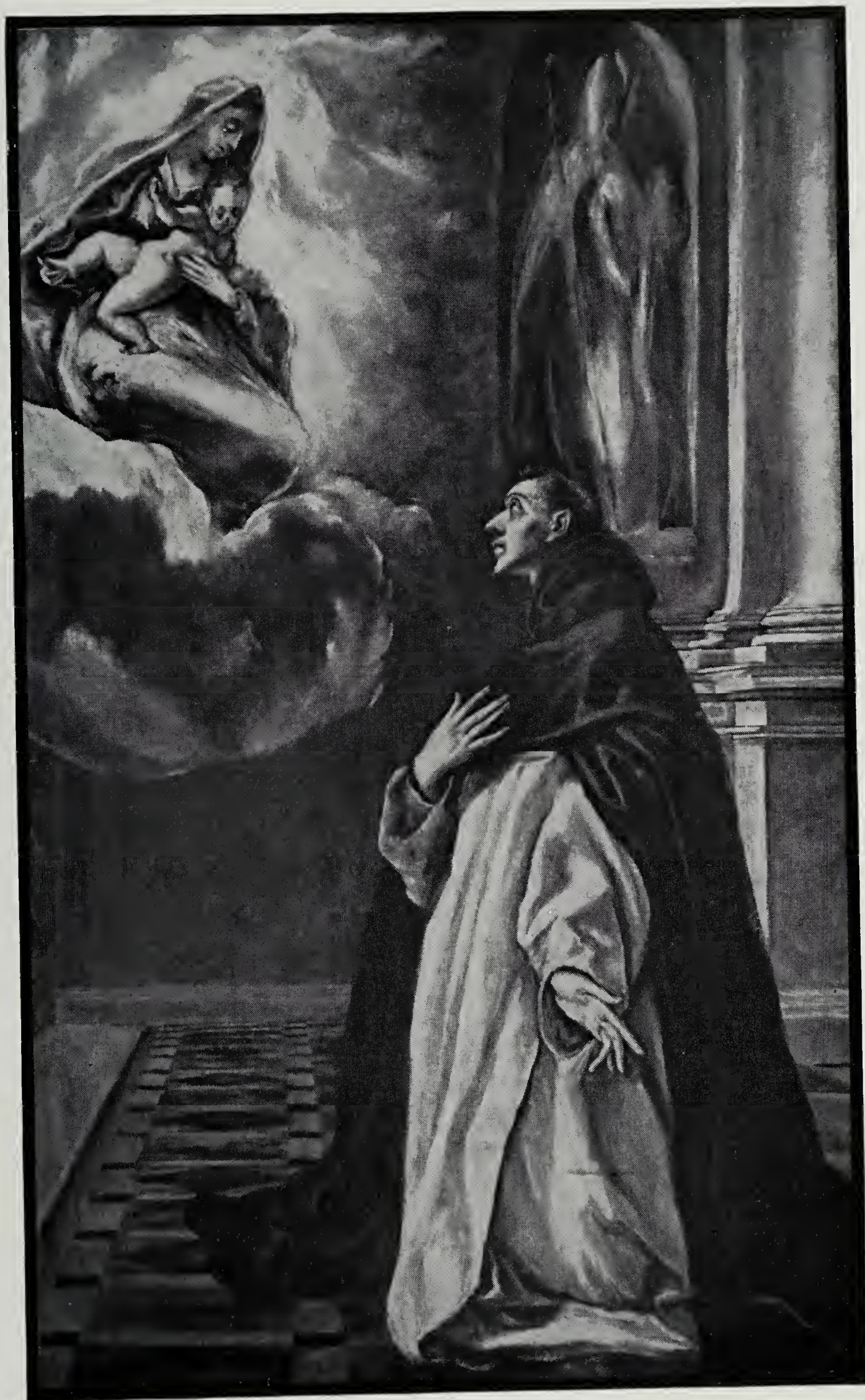




Soutine

*Le Gourdon*





El Greco

*Vision of St. Hyacinth*





Toyokuni

*Standing Figure*  
(Japanese Woodcut Print)

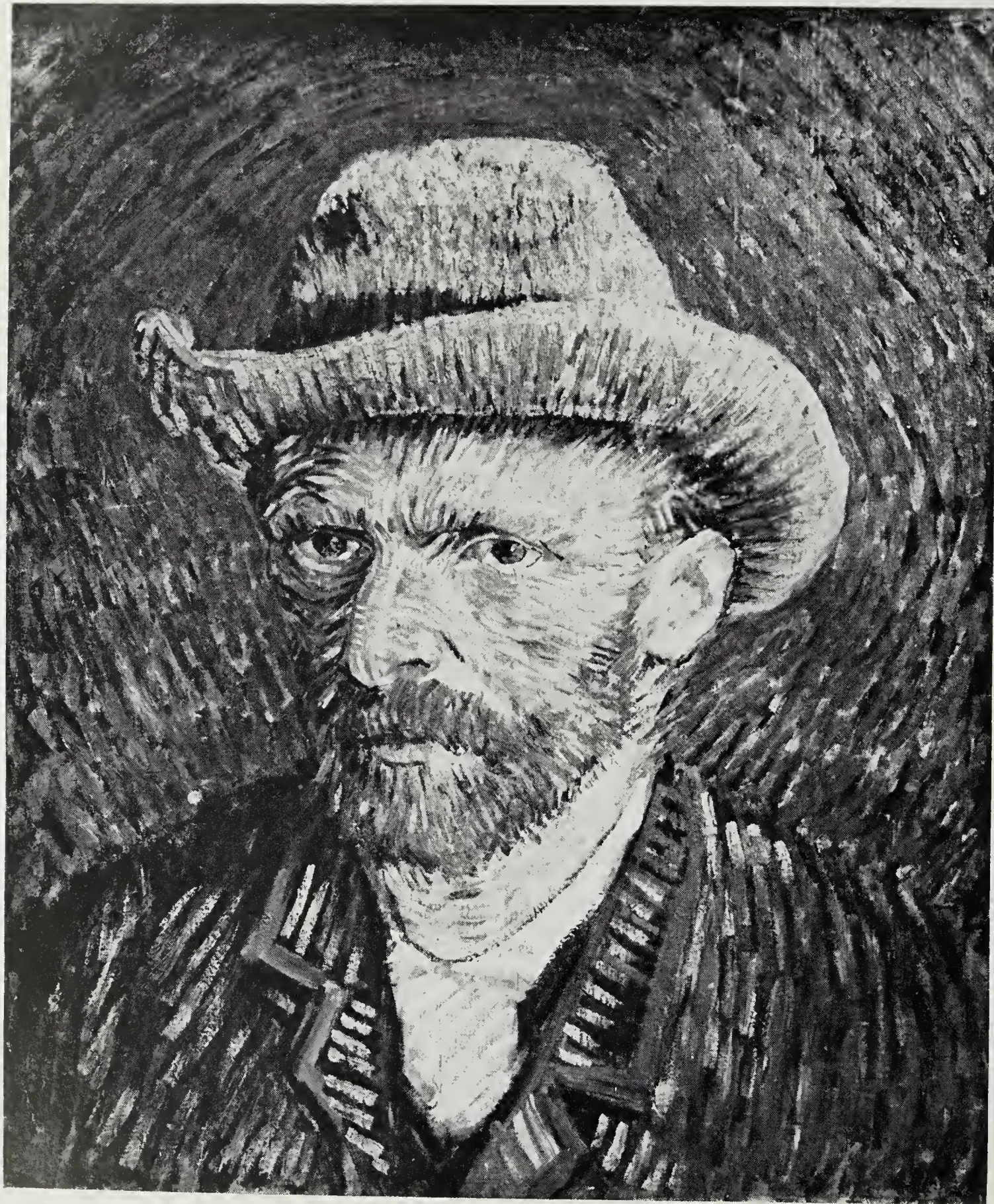




Yoshitsuya

Figures in Interior  
(Japanese Woodcut Print)





Van Gogh

*Self-Portrait with Grey Hat*  
(Rijksmuseum—Vincent van Gogh Stichting, Amsterdam)



FOLD-OUT





Byzantine Mosaic

Detail from *Queen Theodora and Her Retinue*  
(Basilica di San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy  
Photograph—Alinari)





Van Gogh

*Postman*





Frans Hals

*A Dutch Burgher*





Renoir

*The Bohemian Girl*  
(Collection André Meyer, New York)

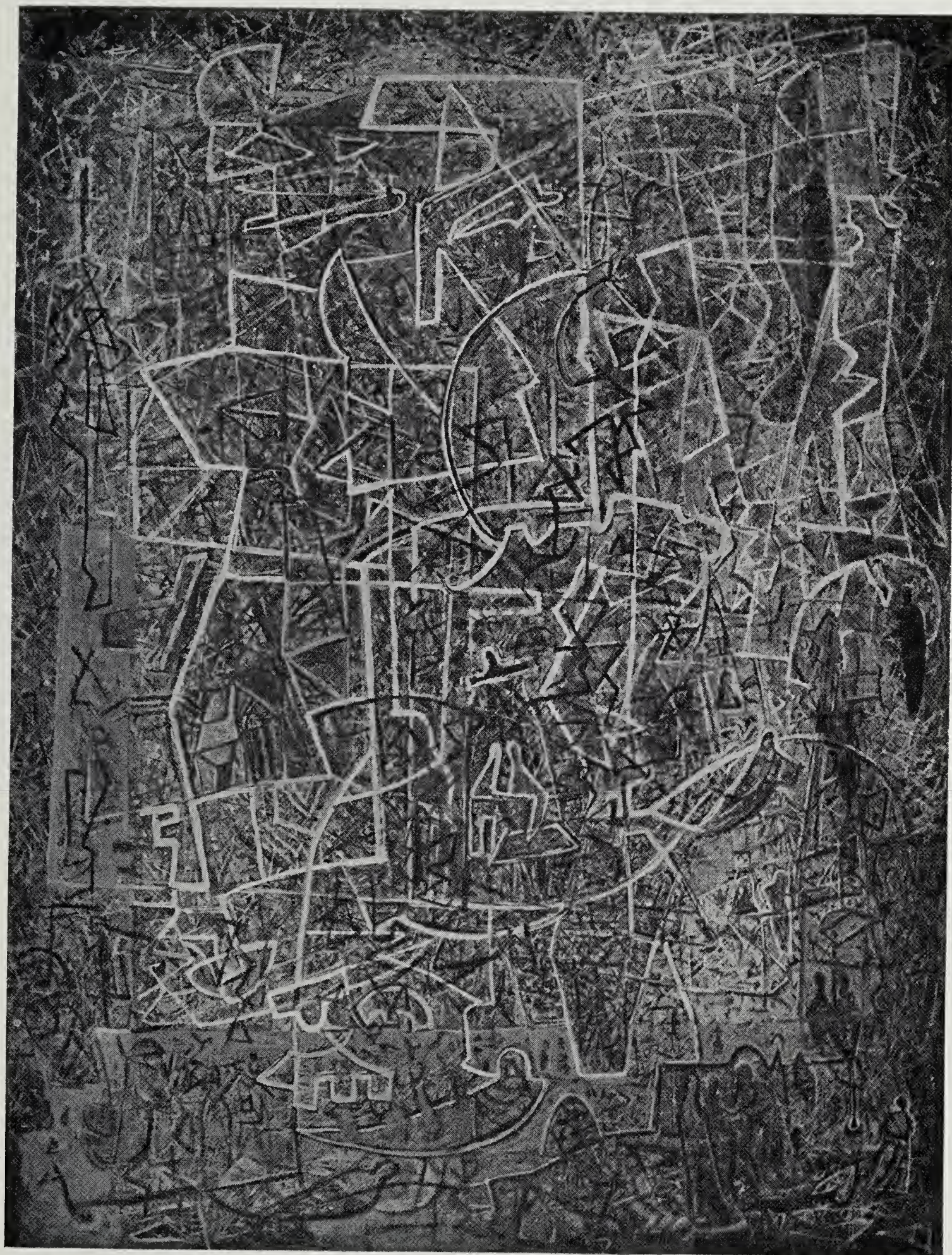




Klee

*Destruction and Hope*  
(Lithograph and Watercolor)  
(From: James Thrall Soby, *The Prints*  
of Paul Klee, Curt Valentin, New York, 1945.)



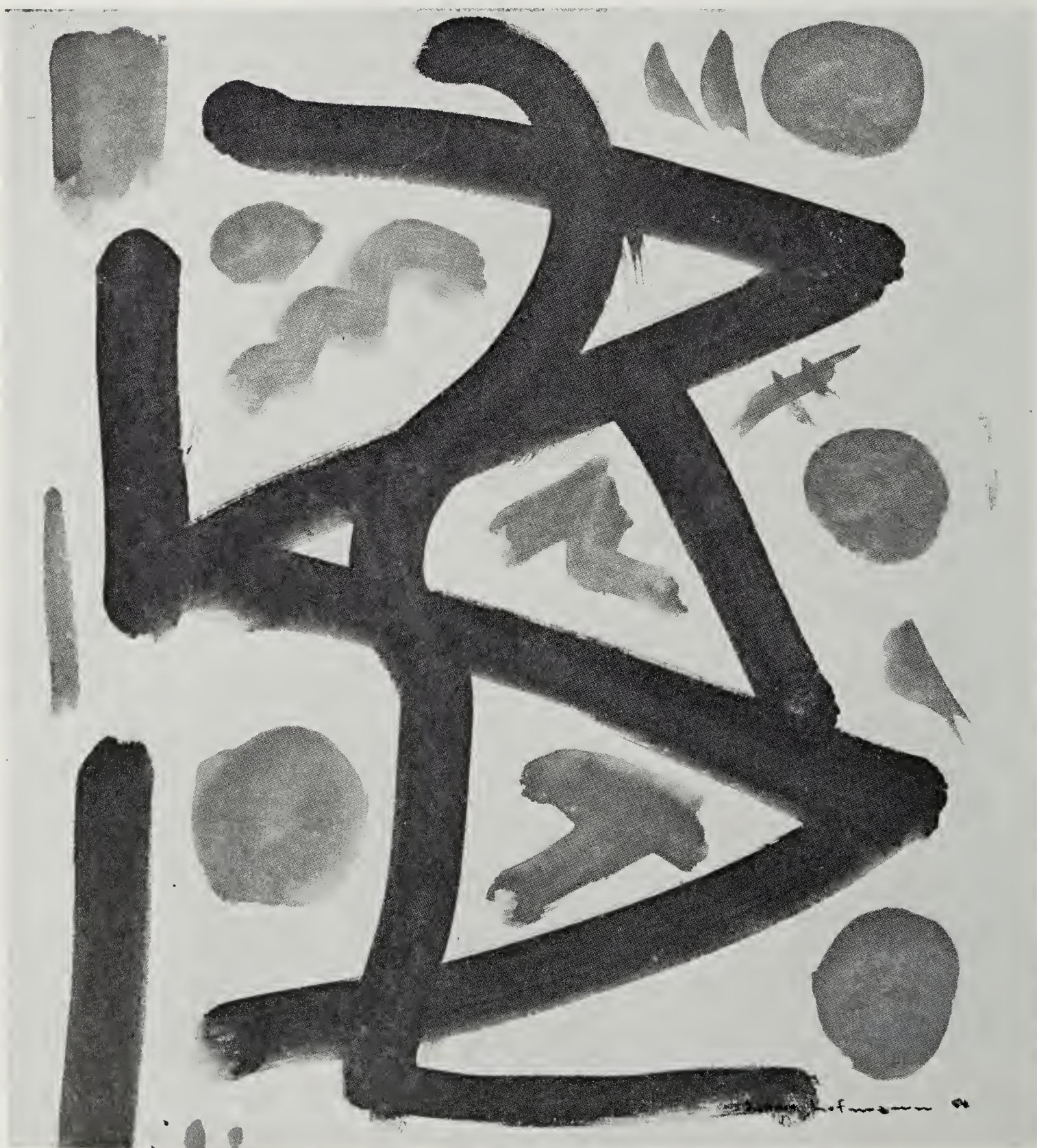


Mark Tobey

*Dormition of the Virgin*  
(Formerly, Collection The Rev. and Mrs. Josiah Bartlett, Seattle  
—Present location unknown  
—Photograph courtesy of The Editors of Artnews, New York)



PLATE 86



Hans Hofmann

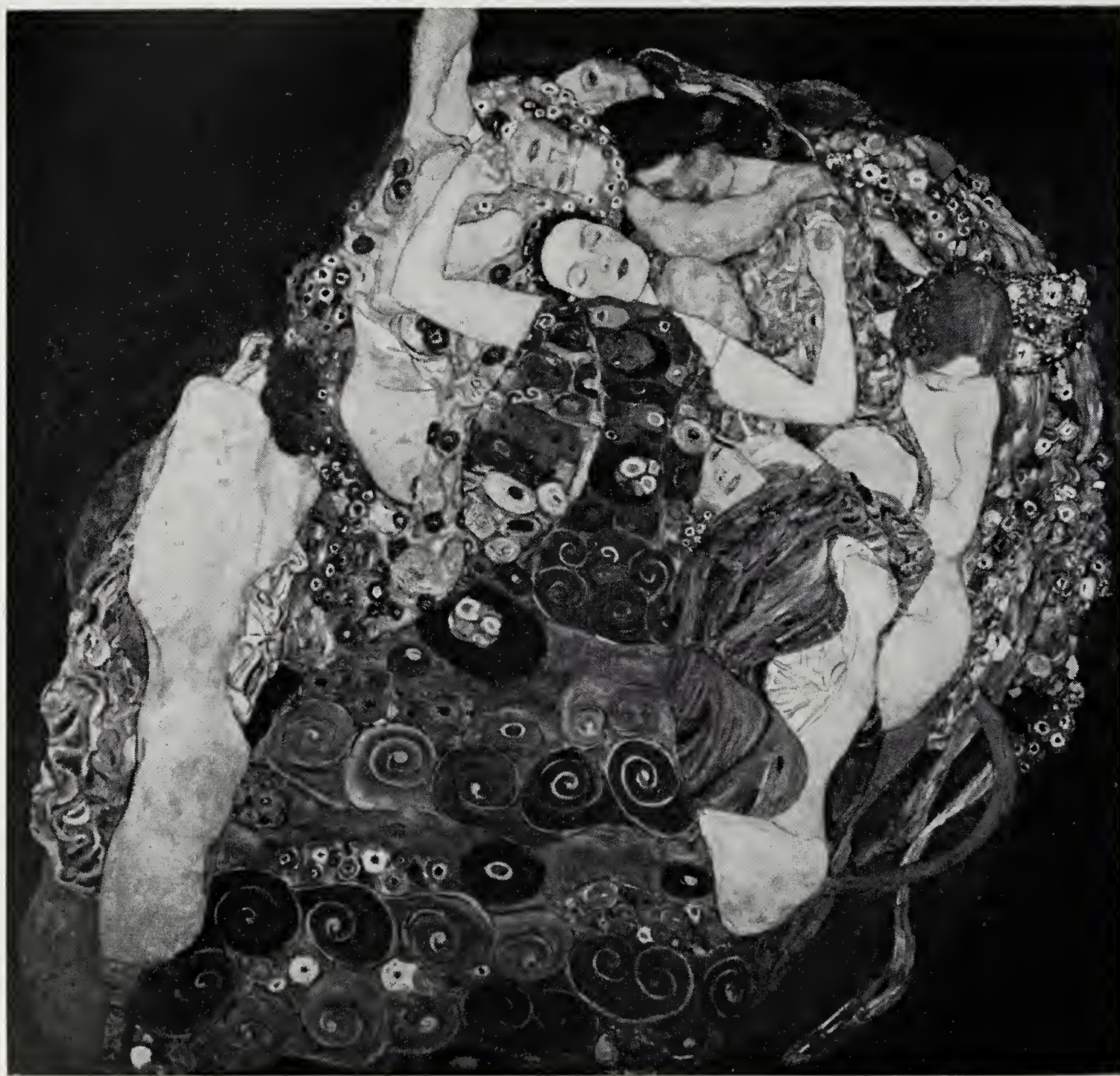
*Magazine Cover—Untitled*  
(© 1954, Artnews—  
Cover Artnews, December, 1954)





Linear Patterns

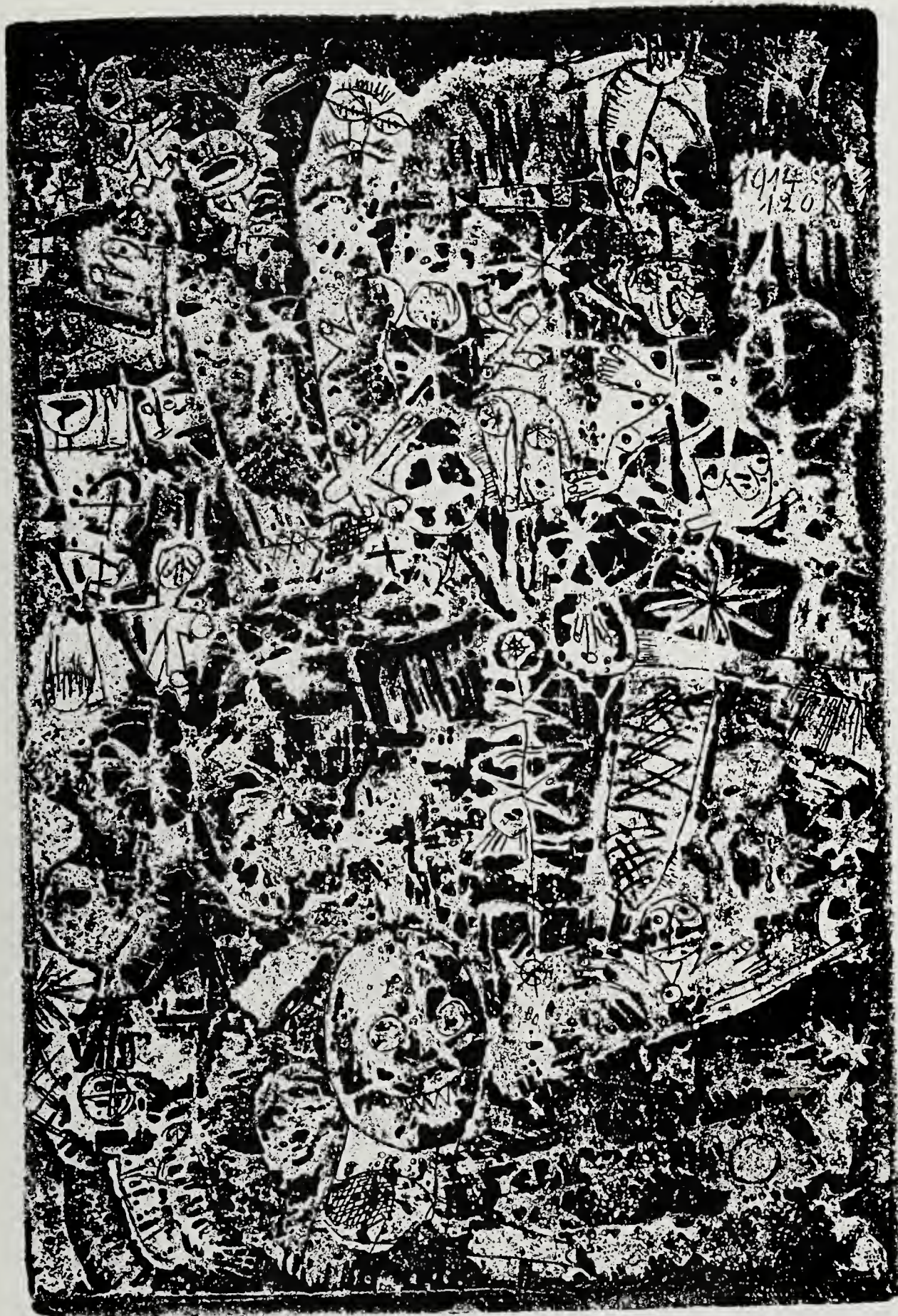




Gustav Klimt

*The Virgin*  
(National Gallery in Prague)





Klee

*Little World*  
(Etching—Original Size)  
(From: James Thrall Soby, *The Prints*  
of Paul Klee, Curt Valentin, New York, 1945.)









Rubens

Detail from *David Playing on  
His Harp* (Plate 51)





Van Gogh

*Thatches in the Sunshine (Reminiscence of the North)*





Rubens

Detail from *David Playing on  
His Harp* (Plate 51)





Van Gogh

*Thatches in the Sunshine (Reminiscence of the North)*

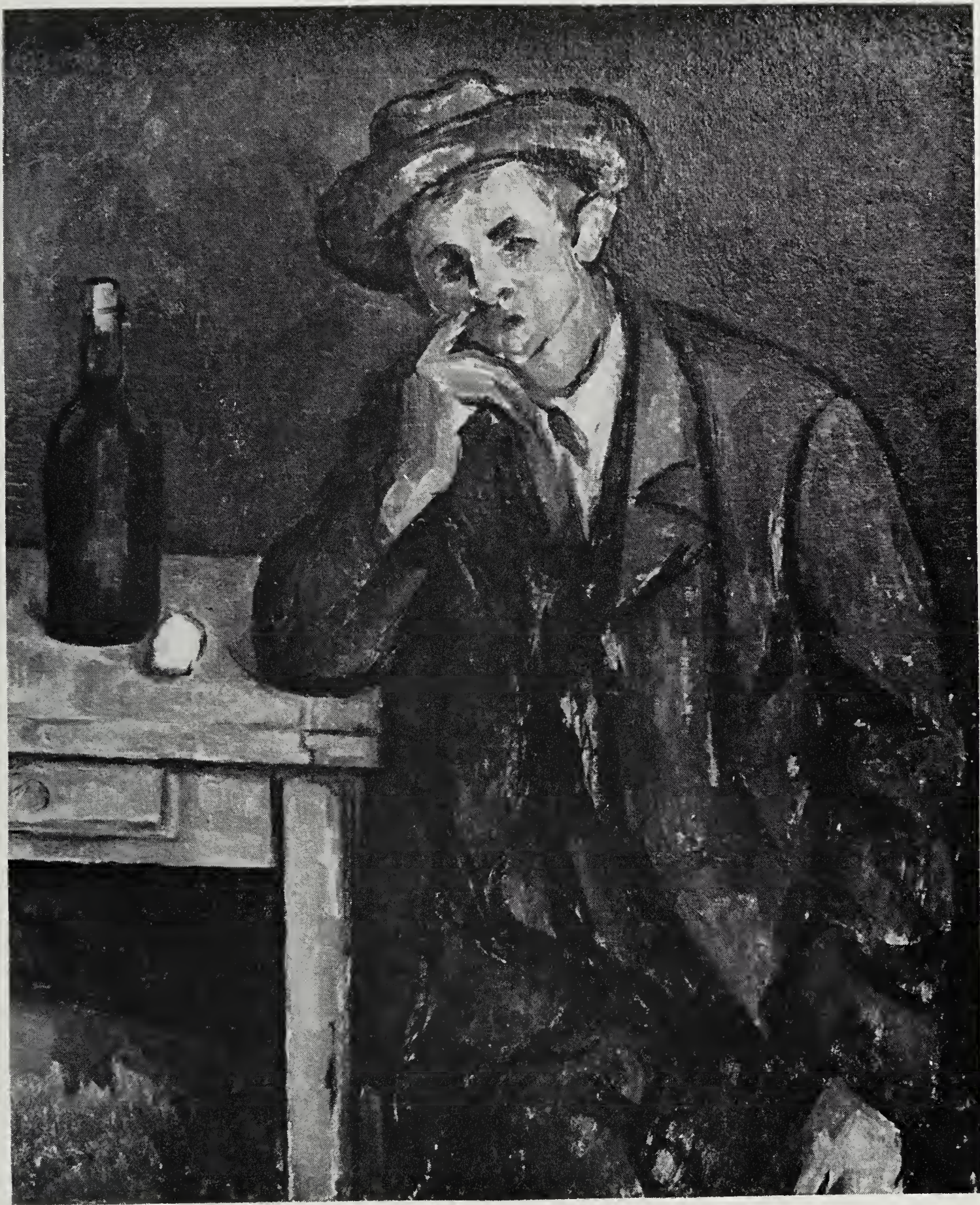




Attributed to Filippino Lippi

*The Madonna and Child with Infant St. John and Two Angels*  
(Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, Scotland—  
Presented by Mrs. Mary Ann Walker in memory  
of her father, James Young, 1902)



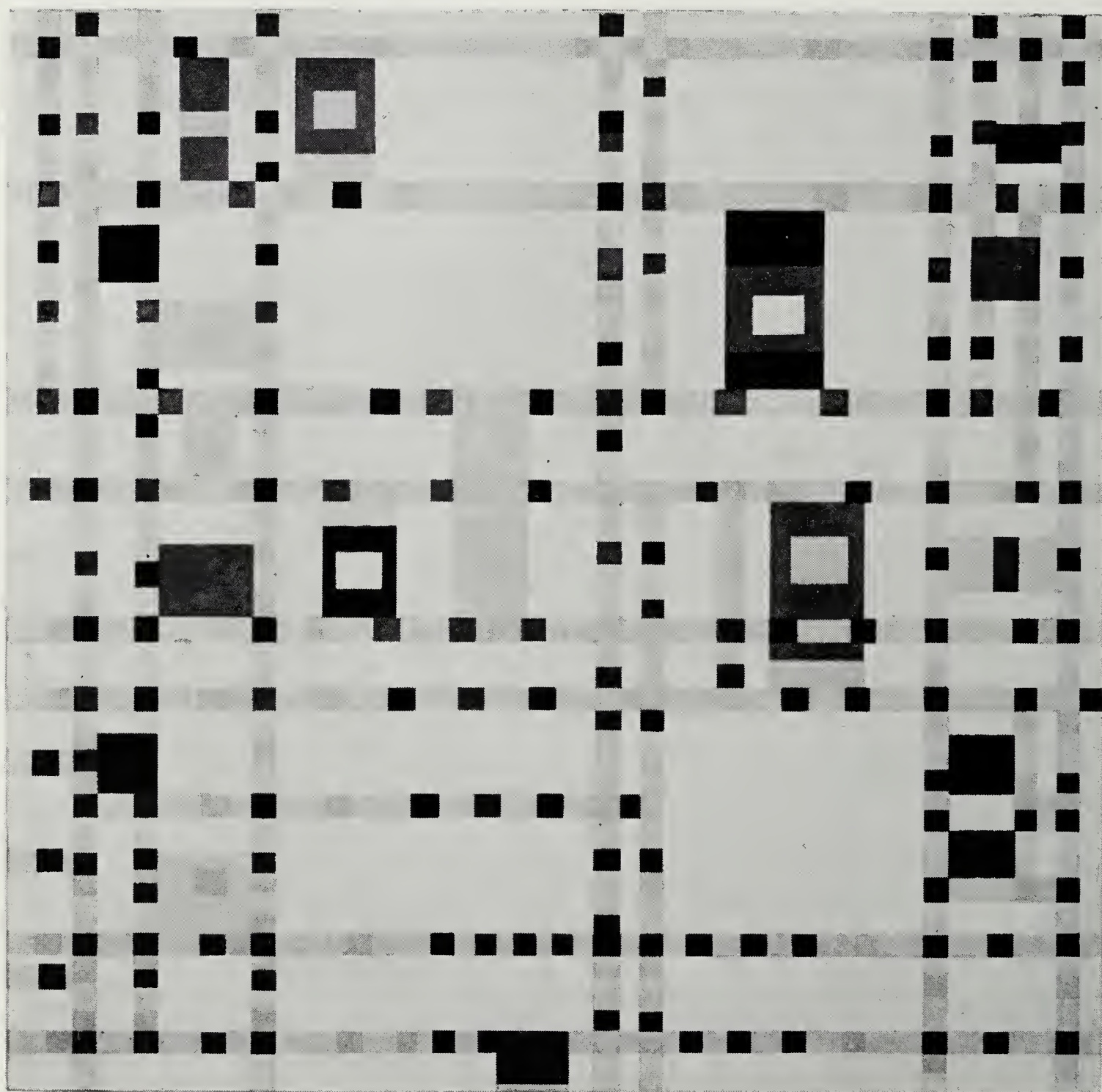


Cézanne

*The Drinker*



PLATE 95



Mondrian

*Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, 1942–1943  
(Oil on canvas, 50" × 50")  
(Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
—Given Anonymously)



PLATE 96



Antique Iron Candlesticks: left to right—American, Spanish, American

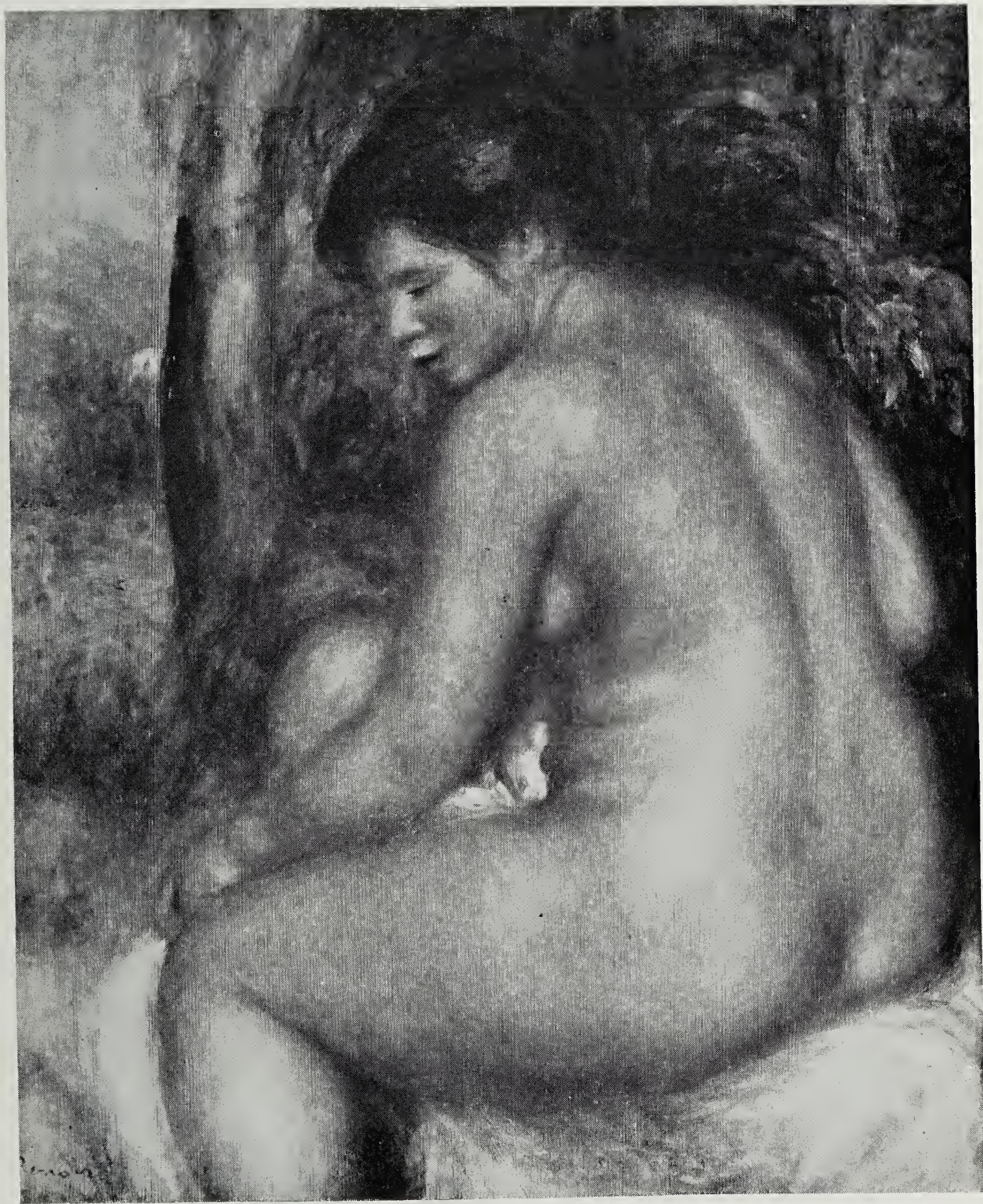




Renoir

*Woman on Hillside*

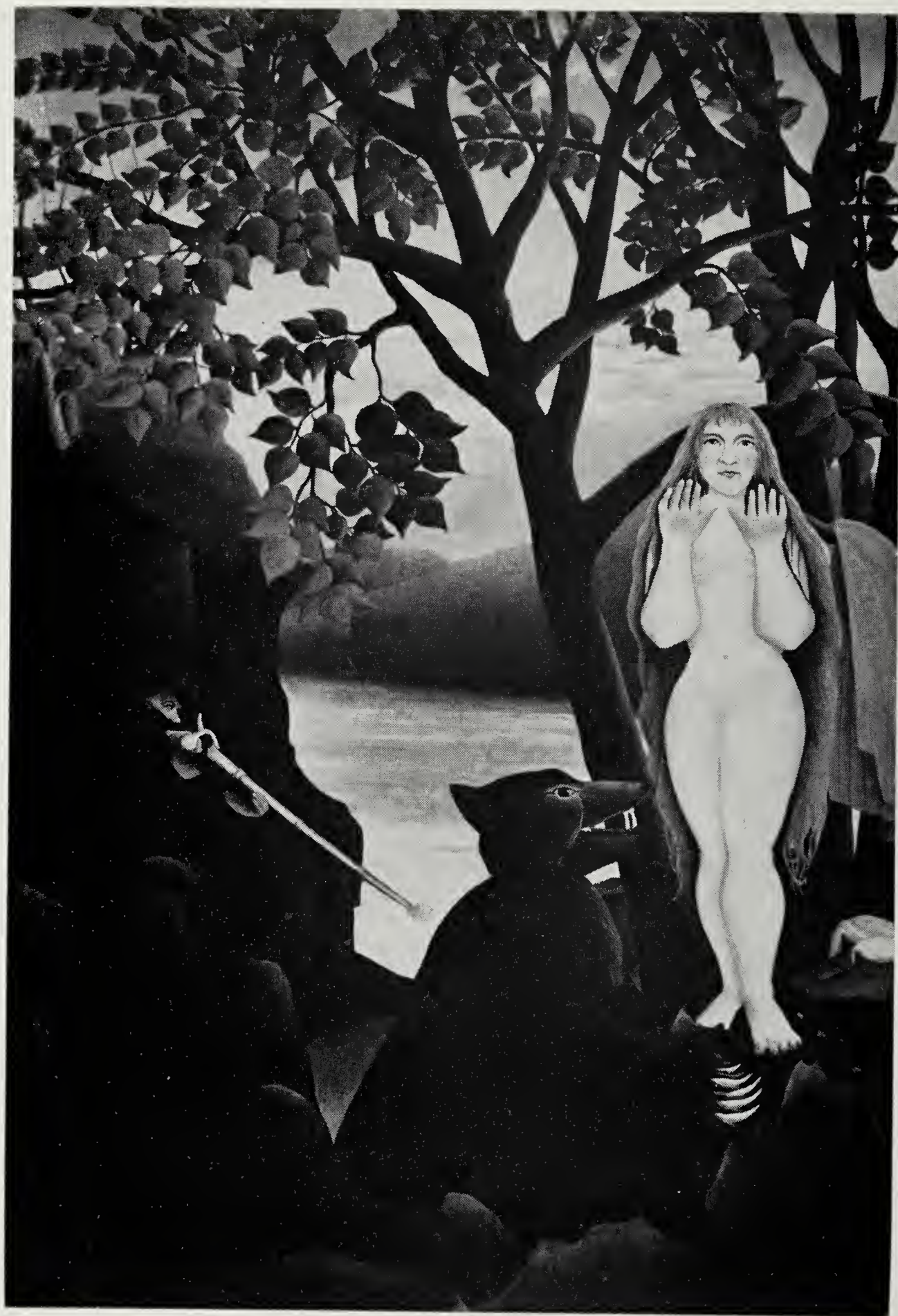




Renoir

*Nude, Back View*





Henri Rousseau

*An Unpleasant Surprise*

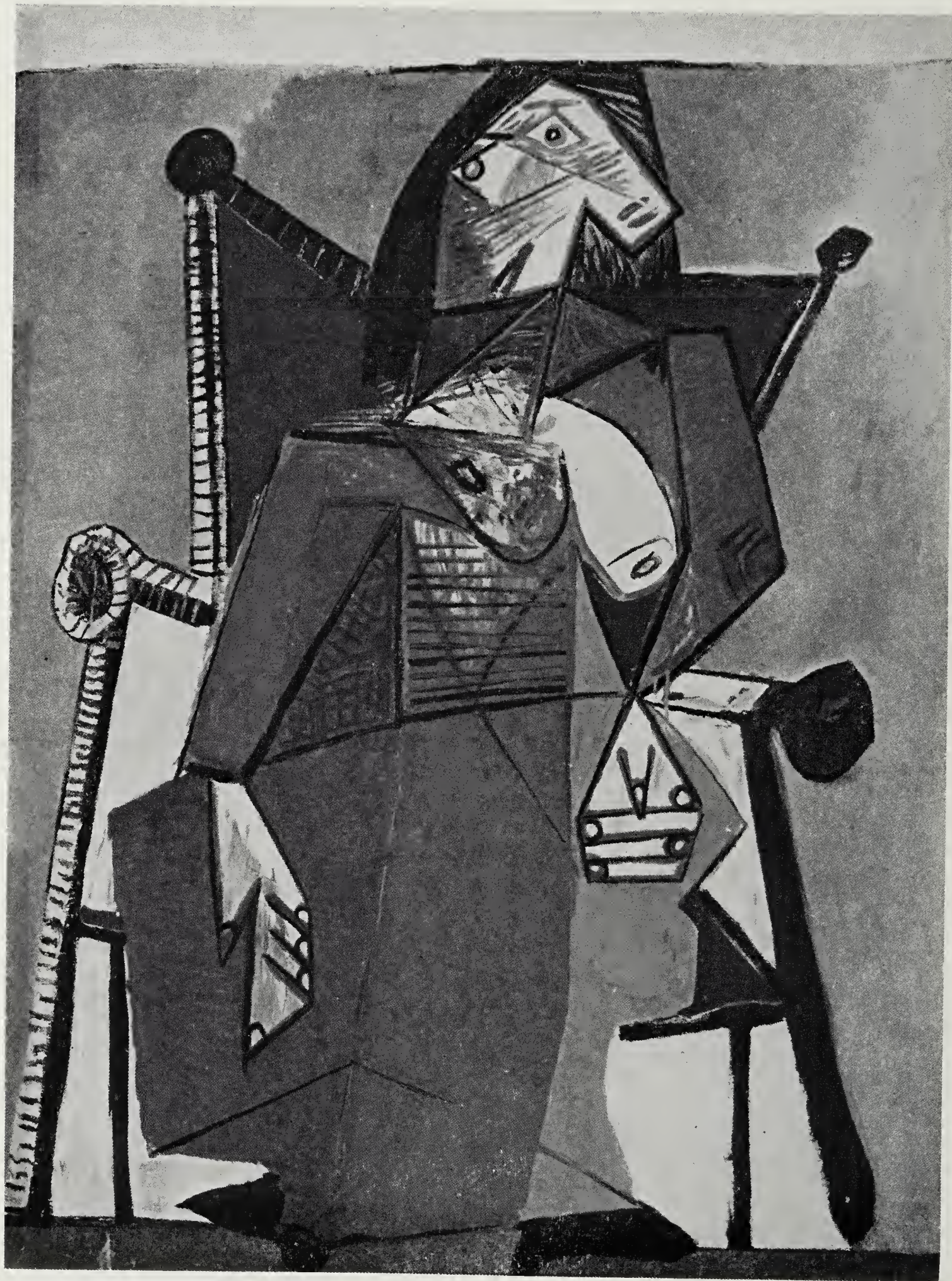




Veronese

*The Finding of Moses*  
(The Hermitage, Leningrad)





Picasso

*Woman Seated in Armchair*  
(Formerly Collection André Lefèvre—Present location unknown  
—Photograph, Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris  
Courtesy French Reproduction Rights, Inc., New York)





Picasso

*Seated Woman*  
(Present location unknown—  
Courtesy S.P.A.D.E.M., Paris, 1975)





De Kooning

*Red Man with Moustache*  
(Courtesy Fourcade, Droll, Inc., New York)







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## FIRST YEAR—BASIC COURSE

Fundamentals of art and education. The problem of appreciation. The objective method. The roots of art. The art in art. Learning to see.

## SECOND YEAR

Application of basic principles of art and education to a systematic study of the aesthetic development of the important traditions in painting and of the work of individual artists.

## SEMINAR AND RESEARCH SESSIONS

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